



# PRESIDENCE DE LA REPUBLIQUE

ADDRESS

BY MR. JACQUES CHIRAC PRESIDENT OF THE REPUBLIC

ON THE OCCASION OF THE WORLD HEALTH DAY DEVOTED TO ROAD SAFETY

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INTERNATIONAL CONFERENCE CENTRE - PARIS

WEDNESDAY 7 APRIL 2004

Mr. Director-General of the World Health Organisation, Honourable Ministers,  
Your Excellencies the Ambassadors, Honourable Members of Parliament, Ladies and  
Gentlemen,

You have come here from around the world in order to condemn a mass slaughter  
and to commit to doing everything possible to put an end to it.

Every year, one million, two hundred thousand people are killed on the roads,  
making road accidents one of the primary causes of violent death in the world.

It is in order to put an end to this that the WHO has devoted this year's World  
Health Day to Road Safety. For road accidents can no longer be regarded as  
being due to unfortunate mischance or as an inevitable accompaniment of the  
modern world. They are a public health problem on the planetary scale.

Many of those deaths could be avoided by a systematic focus on prevention, more  
responsible behaviour and resolute action by the public authorities.

We must go beyond righteous anger, and send out a message focused on life and  
responsibility.

France is particularly honoured to have been chosen by the WHO to be your host  
in Paris. In France's name, I wish to extend our thanks to you, Mr.  
Director-General. I see in this an acknowledgement of the collective effort  
undertaken in our country to improve road safety.

Until recently, France had the unhappy distinction of much higher mortality on  
the roads than our neighbours.

It is for this reason that the combat to improve road safety is among the  
priority projects conducted, at my request, by the French government. That  
effort must continue. In the space of two years, the number of accidents has  
dropped sharply. Such results have been obtained only through unrelenting  
commitment on the part of the public authorities and a fundamental change in



behaviour for which I wish to pay tribute here to all French men and women.

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The statistics for injury and death on the roads around the world are frightening. More than a million dead every year, and 50 million individuals injured or rendered infirm.

Such figures can never express the pain, the incomprehension, and the utter shock felt by families in the face of tragedies that nothing can put right, dramatic events all the more unbearable for being accidents in nothing but name.

Behind the statistics there is the scandal of lives broken off in their prime. And it is the young who are hit hardest by the lack of safety on the roads.

There is also here a very real scourge in society. The existence of many families becomes precarious due to the cost of prolonged medical care or the loss of a wage-earner in the family.

And, lastly, there is the enormous waste of the human potential thus sacrificed. The economic cost of inadequate road safety is currently estimated by the WHO at five hundred billion euros every year, a figure equal to one or two percentage points of the national wealth of each country.

Road traffic injuries inflict suffering on wealthy countries. But they cause even greater suffering to countries with middle or low incomes. Almost nine out of every ten victims are to be found there, despite their significantly smaller numbers of vehicles. For those countries injury and death on the roads are a threat that is all the more worrying because their traffic is destined to increase greatly.

No government can turn its back on such a scourge. If we do not react with vigour, traffic injuries and deaths will increase by two-thirds between now and 2020. Road accidents will by then have become the third most frequent cause of death worldwide.

One of the great merits of the report of the World Health Organisation and the World Bank, just published by Dr. Lee, is to make us aware of the gravity of the situation and the risk of a public health disaster in low-income countries.

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This World Health Day devoted to Road Safety is therefore intended to send out to the world a warning that is serious, certainly, but also one focused on



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solidarity. It is a call for all to mobilise. For this carnage on the roads is not inevitable. It can be abated if the right resources are mobilised and if the public authorities show total determination.

Despite the frightening regularity of the statistics, for many years we refused to see in inadequate road safety an issue of public responsibility. Road accidents continued to arouse only limited public interest. The victims were left to their fate, almost forgotten, as if their suffering was in some way an embarrassment. Above all, accidents are still all too often presented as individual tragedies, whereas in fact they involve our collective responsibility. Our adversary is fatalism.

For it is not the roads that kill. Cars do not kill. In fact, in every accident, human beings cause the death of other human beings. Through negligence. Through lack of prudence. Through a deliberate refusal to abide by the rules governing the sharing of a public space, the highway. Or through indifference to others.

Over and above the individual responsibility of each driver, we must emphasise the capital importance of the steps taken by the public authorities to influence the behaviour of all of us.

Naturally, they must prevent and punish the actions of dangerous drivers. But they must also ensure that all of us drive with greater care and with particular vigilance with regard to others.

Road safety policy is also aimed at correcting a major inequality. We are not all equal where accidents are concerned. Some have heavy, robust vehicles equipped with all possible internal protection systems for themselves, while other road-users are extremely vulnerable: those in lighter vehicles, pedestrians, cyclists and motorcyclists, horse-drawn vehicles .... And as ever, the most vulnerable are the hardest hit.

At the heart of the commitment to road safety there is a fundamental combat for a society that is more humane, one with greater solidarity and respect for others. We share the highway. Road safety is something we provide for each other.

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When the political will is there, it is possible to take steps against inadequate road safety. The experience of a number of countries over the last twenty years is evidence of just that. Technological progress also enables us to envisage new protective measures. The report of the World Health Organisation and the World Bank surveys all of these means of acting upon the behaviour of road users, upon vehicles and upon roads. If we are to be effective, a holistic approach must be developed.



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Research to gain greater knowledge of road accidents must be supported by the public authorities. This is a prerequisite for any appropriate and effective prevention policy.

We cannot tolerate excessive speed, by which accidents are made dramatically worse. There can be no compromise on alcohol or drugs at the wheel, since these are major risk factors. Lastly, we must develop substantially the use of restraint devices such as safety belts and seats designed for children, the safety benefits of which are proven.

Such radical changes presuppose training, education even, starting in childhood. They also entail the implementation of an effective policy of controls and sanctions to ensure both obedience to a clearly defined set of rules and protection of individual rights. Prevention and punishment are two wholly complementary aspects of action.

At the same time, roads and vehicles must continue to evolve to provide greater protection for their users. The fight for greater road safety begins with the design and maintenance of roads and their signage. As for cars, thanks to the efforts of their makers, they are making ceaseless progress toward greater safety for passengers and also, increasingly, pedestrians, in the event of collision.

Due to this, those countries with car industries have particular responsibility with regard to all other countries.

To conclude, the development of a culture of safety requires commitment on the part of the main channels for public opinion, in particular the media, as well as associations and non-governmental organisations, whose role is absolutely essential in the raising of collective awareness on this issue.

The theme of this day must also lead us to reflect on how those injured on the roads and the families of victims are cared for. We must improve the situation of those who, whether directly or indirectly, find themselves faced with the consequences of a tragedy on the roads: diminished mobility, major disability or brain damage. Let us never forget that traffic accidents are frequently a cause of disablement. The refusal to resign ourselves to road accidents also means strengthening the solidarity of society with their victims.

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Mr. Director General, Ladies and Gentlemen,

It is my wish that this World Health Day should mark a step forward in the collective awareness of this evil which strikes at our modern world.



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France is determined to play its full part in global public health policy to combat road traffic injuries and deaths. France will do so most notably by taking part in measures for cooperation and the sharing of experience.

This is a combat that squarely confronts all of us individuals and States with our responsibilities.

It is a combat against suffering and resignation.

It is a combat for life.

You can rely on France's commitment to that combat.

I thank you. |