# Unsafe roads

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A bank worker crossing a pedestrian lane last week was hit by an SUV whose driver was trying to beat the red light. The accident, caught on video and uploaded on social media, happened in Bonifacio Global City (BGC), Manila’s high-end business enclave, which ironically has a “pedestrian-first” policy.

The video has gone viral and caused public uproar over the lack of safety for pedestrians on the streets of Metro Manila and even in the provinces. This is supported by data from the Department of Health, which said earlier this year that an average of 12,000 Filipinos die yearly due to road accidents; many of these deaths are of pedestrians getting hit when crossing the street.

Nicole Mercado, the BGC pedestrian victim, survived the accident though her case does not only present an example of reckless driving but also of how broken the justice system is. She claimed that she was pressured into signing a settlement agreement that was inadequate to the physical and emotional trauma she endured. Several social media users have chimed in on how the practice of “areglo” was common in road accidents like this to protect car drivers from accountability.

## ‘Pedestrian first’ policy

In a Facebook post in January 2021, BGC stated: “Here at BGC, we implement a ‘pedestrians first’ policy to ensure that all #BGCitizens are safe and secure when crossing our streets. All vehicles must follow this #BGCityrule for everyone’s safety.” But if an accident caused by a reckless driver can happen in places like BGC, where signal lights and crosswalks abound, how much more in other areas where these elements are lacking, putting pedestrians at risk?

A day after the BGC accident, President Marcos, by sheer coincidence, met with Jean Todt, the United Nations secretary general’s special envoy for road safety, to discuss the Philippines’ progress on road safety and future actions needed to achieve the 2021-2030 Decade of Action for Road Safety Goals. “In a Bagong Pilipinas, our roads are built to connect and protect, bringing people together safely. We are committed to making our roads safer for all Filipinos,” Mr. Marcos said. He pledged to make roads safer, particularly for pedestrians and riders.

That is a tall order because Philippine streets are still among the world’s most dangerous for pedestrians and riders. Sidewalks and motorcycle lanes remain an afterthought rather than a major consideration when planning and building road infrastructure networks.

## Inadequate infrastructure

For instance, when mobility restrictions were lifted after the pandemic, there was much talk about establishing motorcycle and bicycle lanes but implementation remains inconsistent across cities and towns. The same could be said about sidewalks that are non-existent in areas where pedestrians are most likely to pass including near train stations.

An article by a life insurance firm cited several factors that contribute to road accidents in the country such as the poor conditions of the roads—either they are in a state of disrepair, littered with potholes, lacking proper signage, or insufficient lighting. Another factor is driver behavior from reckless driving, speeding, driving under the influence of alcohol or drugs, to distracted driving. “The lack of strict enforcement of traffic laws exacerbates these behaviors,” said Golden Future Life Plans. It added that the weak implementation of regular vehicle inspections could lead to unsafe vehicles being driven. Then there is the inadequate infrastructure: lack of pedestrian lanes, bike lanes, and proper crossing points.

The national government has launched several road safety action plans over the years and through many administrations. The latest, which covers the period 2023-2028, is no different from previous ones. What the country needs is not a regurgitation of plans that are presented every time there is a change in administration, but proper implementation of these and an accessible tracking of progress made.

## Zero deaths

Officials can keep on citing the “five pillars” of road safety but if there is no real action on the plans, specifically in improving road conditions and stricter enforcement of traffic laws, then no tangible progress could be made and accidents like the one in BGC would be repeated in other parts of the country.

Last May, which was Road Safety Month, Department of Health spokesperson Albert Domingo, said the government seeks to improve the public’s awareness, understanding, and attitude on road safety. “Our vision is actually a Philippine society with zero deaths on the road,” he said. Domingo went on to advise the public to walk instead of riding a vehicle if their destination is near and there is sufficient shade to do so.

Philippine roads, unfortunately, are still not made for walking. Safer roads begin with the proper infrastructure and educating the public about traffic laws, and unless these are done, the goal of reducing deaths on the road—much more achieving zero deaths—will remain a road to nowhere.