



## UN-ESCWA Advisory Committee Convenes First 2009 Meeting



UN-ESCWA Advisory Committee convened its first meeting for 2009 on Thursday 19 March at the UN-House, Riad El-Solh Square. Chiefs of diplomatic missions of the 14-member Regional Commission participated in the meeting, which was presided by UN-ESCWA Executive Secretary Bader Omar AlDafa.



Chief of UN-ESCWA Conference Services Section, Ahed Sbouh, laid out the main areas of work of the Regional Commission, which strives to strengthen economic and social development in the countries of the region and anchor cooperation, communication, and information-sharing among them and with the rest of the regions.

The meeting also tackled UN-ESCWA main achievements in the areas of transport facilitation and trade; information and communication technology; financing for development; integrated social policies; accurate and comparable statistics; water resource management; assisting conflict-ridden regions; and women empowerment.

The meeting touched on world developments and the role UN-ESCWA is playing in this context. Discussions extended to the international financial crisis, climate change and food security. The meeting also discussed UN-ESCWA activities that were implemented in 2008 and those to be executed in 2009, as



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well as the official visits by the Executive Secretary to member countries and the plans for the Regional Commission's 35th Anniversary. ■

*The Advisory Committee consists of heads of diplomatic missions or their deputies to the host country (Lebanon), in addition to a high-level representative from the host country. It plays a consultative role and functions as a major means of communication between member countries and the UN-ESCWA Secretariat on important matters requiring attention between ministerial sessions.*

# Distracted Driving: When Talking Leads to Dead Ends

From the 1980s to date, several studies have been conducted across the globe to assess the impact of mobile phones on driving performance. The results, time and again, are the same: Using a mobile phone not only distracts you while you drive your vehicle, but it is one of the leading causes of car crashes.

## The Mobile Ordeal



The main findings of these studies, which place distracted driving as a leading cause of crashes, are reflected in every country in the world including those in the Middle East. Further explaining these studies, First Economic Officer and Transport Expert at UN-ESCWA Economic Development and Globalization Division, Bassam Anani says that the impact of using a mobile phone while driving ranges from longer reaction times to difficulty in maintaining a consistent speed. It has also been proven that drivers' mental workload increases, which results in higher stress and frustration levels – conditions not conducive to safe driving.

According to a report by the Transport Research Laboratory (United Kingdom), using a mobile phone while driving causes greater problems for those drivers who already have a higher

crash risk, namely young, novice drivers and elderly drivers. More importantly, drivers using phones are four times as likely to get into crashes – a ratio not to be taken lightly.



## Regional Perspective and Partnerships

The UN-ESCWA region has a large number of car crashes caused by distracted driving, in particular, the use of the mobile phone while driving. In recent years, mobile phone use has climbed up the list and has become one of the main causes of distractions amongst drivers in this region due to a wide and easy access to mobile phones.

Partnerships between different bodies in the various sectors including governments, businesses and the civil society on a national as well as regional level can reap huge benefits and help reduce crashes and injuries caused by using a mobile phone while driving. All have different means to the same end of working together to save lives through increased road safety measures.

The Middle East and North Africa Road Safety Partnership (MENARSP), a regional initiative launched by UN-ESCWA together with the Global Road Safety Partnership and Shell, is one such

example which has helped bring together several entities in various fields. The partnership aims at promoting regional collaboration on road safety by supporting the identification, development and implementation of good practice and capacity building projects that can be replicated in different countries in the region. The MENARSP acts as a platform for government, private sector and non-profit entities to communicate on road safety matters.

Such partnerships between the different sectors not only help raise awareness of the dangers of mobile phone driving but also advocate the creation of legislations and regulations to protect citizens and later support their sustainable enforcement. Employers – in the public or private sector – also have a role to play by educating employees about the risks of using hand-held and hands-free communication devices while driving. For instance, Shell has a very stringent policy in place for its employees when it comes to mobile phones and road safety. Staff members are not allowed to make calls, or answer a mobile phone, send or read a text message while driving at work.

It is mainly through the convergence of efforts between governments, the private sector and civil society that our roads can be made safer and crashes can be avoided. Road safety is an integral part of modern society and all sections of the community need to live up to the challenge. Distracted driving, particularly while using a mobile phone, causes numerous crashes – a phenomenon that can be easily eliminated with little effort. ■

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