

## 4.6 Road Accidents on Karnali Highway

---

### Introduction

Since the construction of the Karnali Highway, approximately 100 lives are lost annually due to unstable terrain, inadequate tracks, delayed maintenance, substandard vehicles, and inexperienced drivers. The Karnali Highway, which was hoped to bring development and progress to the region, has earned itself a rather unenviable name among locals: the “death road”. The 232 km Karnali highway came into operation on 13 April 2007, after much delay owing to narrow terrain and the armed conflict. The road runs from Surkhet through Dailikh and Kalikot, along the banks of the Karnali River to Jumla. However, within five years, about 95% of the blacktop has been destroyed.

A survey of Karnali highway was done for the first time in 1985, and construction began in 1991, with a budget of NPR 20 million. The construction gained momentum in 1999 after receiving support from the World Bank, but it was not completed owing to the armed conflict. The responsibility of constructing the highway was later given to the Nepal Army. This Surkhet-Jumla Highway was built with the financial support of the World Bank. The then Prime Minister Girija Prasad Koirala had initiated its construction in 1991, and it took 15 years to complete.

The loss of life and property caused by road accidents in the Karnali province has become a major problem for the government, particularly in terms of annual payouts it has had to make for those

killed and injured in road accidents and their families, the costs of investigation, and other compensation. On 8 May 2023, INSEC Karnali Office filed a public interest litigation seeking the intervention of the Surkhet High Court, laying out the Karnali Provincial Government, and all 10 District Administration Offices in the Province as defendants. On 10 May, the High Court Surkhet Chief Justice Madhav Prasad Pokharel, issued a notice to the defendants seeking their responses to why the court shouldn't take on the request of petitioners against government agencies such as the District Administration Office, District Police Office, and the District Traffic Office. The case is yet to be decided by the court.

The government has spent NPR six billion so far in the building of the colloquial “death road”. The Nepal Army handed over the Karnali highway to the government after its opening in the fiscal year 2007/2008, following which the Surkhet-Jumla road was paved with World Bank support. Apart from the expenditure incurred by the Nepal Army on the Kalikot-Jumla road section, about 290 million was allocated twice in the fiscal year 2010/2011, again with World Bank funding. Similarly, in FY 2011/2012, NPR 130 million was allocated for building the Surkhet to Khidgijyula section and 820 million for Khidgijyula to Jumla, all of which were left unspent due to various reasons. Thereafter, in the year 2013/2014, NPR 182 million was allocated for the Surkhet-Khidgijyula region, and NPR 870 million was allocated for the Khidgijyula-Jumla

stretch. Therefore, between 1991/1992 to 2006/2007, the government spent NPR 1.15 billion rupees on building this road.

### Road Conditions, Accidents, and Loss of Life on the Karnali Highway

According to data from Nepal Police Highway Safety and Traffic Management Office Surkhet, the number of road accidents in the province has been increasing every year. However, no concerned agency has demonstrated a serious concern or made a substantial effort to reduce the number of accidents. The Karnali Highway has several narrow turns in the Dailekh and Kalikot section. At some turnings, approaching vehicles from the other side are not visible. The number of accidents have increased because of the narrow road, passenger overloading, use of old vehicles with poor maintenance, and disregard of traffic rules.

There is a risk of landslides at dozens of points in Surkhet, Kalikot and Jumla sections of the highway. There are sections of the road which isn't even a highway in practice as it is barely wide enough to allow two 6-wheelers to pass one another. However, there are even 4-wheelers operating on the same road. The road has many big potholes and sections with high water logging. This is why it can take a long time to rescue vehicles that get stuck in the mud, according to a representative of the Provincial Police Office.

Landslides reoccur every year at 43 places from Dahi Khola to Jumla, including Dahi Khola, Gagane Khola, Kale Khola, Esmod, Jite Bazar, Sherighat, Meyer Khola, Sunar Khola, Tadi, Galli, Simlegad, Molfa, Pili, Sherabada, Bali, Rachuli, Vikm, Rarali, etc. These frequent landslides are a consistent problem annually. "It is difficult to pass a vehicle where roads are narrow. If a vehicle comes from the other side, you must back up," said Navin Shahi, a driver. "If a vehicle breaks

**Table 4.6.1: Road Accident Statistic**

Fiscal Year	Death	Serious Injury	Road Accident
2014-2015	39	172	139
2015-2016	56	65	76
2016-2017	117	153	101
2017-2018	91	120	88
2018-2019	119	150	146
2019-2020	97	131	236
2020-2021	98	169	291
2021-2022	180	362	403
2022-2023	94	205	341
<b>Total</b>	<b>991</b>	<b>1527</b>	<b>1821</b>

Source: Traffic Police Office, Surkhet

down on the road, other vehicles also have to wait for it to be fixed and operational again."

The accidents taking place on the Karnali Highway should have been a matter of serious concern, for both, the local government and the state. However, this has not been the case. In the days following a major accident, road safety on highways is extensively discussed across the country for a few days, but then the issue tapers. There has not been a major plan to improve highways even though it has been killing hundreds of people every year. There is also a serious lack of regular maintenance on the roads connecting different districts.

In the past few years, it was assumed for the entire Karnali region to grieve during the festive seasons, which is when most accidents occur and many people lose their lives. The data from Nepal Police Highway Safety and Traffic Management Office, Surkhet shows that 991 people died and 1,527 were injured in Karnali province from 2013 to the December 2023. During the early operation of the Karnali highway, a bus crashed into the rocks of Kitu Bhir in Dailekh, dropping into the Karnali river and killing 41 people. Similarly, another accident on 14 October 2011 had killed 33 people. This was a passenger bus carrying students



returning home for the Dashain holidays. It plunged into Pinatpane River in Chayannath Rara Municipality-7, Mugu. In a separate accident, further 24 people had lost their lives on the spot and others during treatment, when a bus traveling to Mugu's headquarters Gamgarhi from Nepalgunj, fell 200 meters down a steep unpaved road. Two months after this accident, in December 2011, 28 people lost their lives in another bus accident at Bittamod in Kalikot. That year's accidents were reported to have taken the lives of 13 in Gadgadani in Jumla, 14 in Khidki in Dailekh and 15 in Kalyan in Surkhet.

According to the traffic police, the main reasons for these deaths were narrow roads, lack of necessary traffic signs, and passenger overloading. Similarly, in the year 2014, a bus accident in Raralihi, Jumla killed 18 people including an infant. The bus plunged into the Tila River 200 meters below the road. These incidents outline some of the major accidents that have taken place on the Karnali highway, not expanding on the thousands of further minor accidents.

Although there are provisions in the Vehicle and Transport Management Act 1992, several provisions have not been enforced. In the case of long-distance public transport, the carrier is required to have at least two drivers who change shifts every six hours, although this practice is limited and often neglected. The law enforcement agencies have fallen short of their responsibilities and there has been not been a strong attempt to hold individuals and stakeholders accountable. The traffic police force is overstretched and has been largely used to manage urban traffic flows, with no resources or manpower for highway policing.

The poor conditioned infrastructure and dangerous roads have a direct impact on human rights. People in remote areas are unable to reach hospitals on time when they suffer major illnesses,

and even police cannot respond in time despite knowing of a crime or human rights violation about to occur. The poor roads have also made rescue and relief efforts during natural disasters challenging. The state is responsible for ensuring that citizens can fully enjoy their rights by respecting, protecting, and fulfilling them.

### **Causes of Accidents**

The Karnali Highway has many narrow turns at various points in the Dailekh and Kalikot section. The vehicles passing on one side of the road are unable to see what lies beyond a turn. There have been an increase in accidents due to the narrow and rough road, whose paving has already washed off in several places. The other reasons of accidents are overloading of passenger vehicles, using old vehicles without proper maintenance, and disregard of traffic rules. There are also driver induced causes of accidents such as not blowing horn on the winding mountain roads, driving while drunk, a single driver driving a long route journey, overloading their vehicle, and driving without obtaining a driver's license.

In September 2012, the Ministry of Infrastructure Development and Transport had undertaken an investigation following a bus accident at Pakha VDC (now Khadachakra Municipality). The accident had resulted in the deaths of 28 people and had injured 11. According to the investigative report, the major causes of accidents were the narrow mountain roads, difficult terrain, overloading of vehicles, inability to enforce the requirement of having two drivers on long trips, challenges in widening and paving the road, inability to check the drivers for alcohol consumption effectively, lack of traffic police, and the use of passenger vehicles as cargo vehicles. There were further reasons for the increase in accidents including missed checks on whether roads

are properly repaired from the roads department when issuing route permits, allowing night bus services to be operated without considering road conditions, lack of compliance with road safety by drivers, inactive highway patrol, and low awareness of traffic rules.

According to Shir Bahadur Ghimire, head of the Surkhet-Jumla (Karnali Highway) project, it is not just narrow roads that cause accidents. “The drivers are also inadequately trained, they do not blow the horn at bends, a major reason for accidents is the negligence of the driver”, he said, “One has to drive more carefully on narrow roads”.

Another reason for the poor road condition is the poor overlook on contractors during the construction. Chandrajung Malla of Khandachakra Municipality-2, Hulma stated, “Living on the roadside one is difficult as there are just too many accidents”. The blacktopping was not done at many sections, and wherever it was, it was not done properly, resulting in neighboring communities being covered in dust along such sections. According to Malla, sections that were not blacktopped by the contractor were the Sangetada and Paltada mentioned in this section. Malla lost five relatives in a bus accident on 10 September 2012, as they were heading from Manma to Jumla. “This highway is not a blessing but has become a curse,” he said. “The government is proud of having connected Jumla but people are dying prematurely on the roads.”

The Minister of Internal Affairs and Law of the Provincial Government, Krishna Bahadur GC said that road improvement in Karnali shall be done gradually. He added, “The Provincial Government has delegated the relevant road

project and offices to do what needs to be done.

The Karnali police office has started a “Safe Karnali Special Campaign” to reduce road accidents and improve road infrastructure. The Provincial Police Chief, Deputy Inspector General of Police, Bhim Prasad Dhakal said that he has collected details of the condition of all roads in Karnali, with a special focus on those needing urgent improvement and forwarded them to the provincial government and the road department. He added that repairs should be done immediately at 11 locations in Surkhet, two in Rukum and at dozens of locations in Kalikot. Traffic signals also need to be placed at 28 different locations.

The stretch from Dailekh to Nagm in Kalikot has been identified as a high-risk area prone to numerous accidents. In response, the road department plans to install a 26-kilometer steel fence along this route, from Dailekh Lower Dugeswar to Kalikot. Dipendra Bisht, Head of the Road Division Office in Jumla, stated that the department is in the process of identifying hazardous locations and will soon initiate the tendering process. The proposed solution involves installing a 90 cm high steel barrier to mitigate accidents involving small vehicles, aiming to enhance safety along this critical section of the highway.

## Conclusion

The cases of accidents have not been controlled due to lack of analysis citing always drivers as the main culprits. These cases can be controlled only if legal, institutional and police, transport workers work in unison.

## References

- Bisht, D, (2023) Speaker, Head of the Road Division Office in Jumla
- Bishta, L. (2023, May 21). Karnali's road to death. *Citizen News*. <https://nagariknews.nagariknetwork.com/social-affairs/1179601-1684634098.html>
- G.C,K.B.(2023)Speaker,TheMinisterofInternalAffairsandLawoftheprovincialgovernment
- Dhakal, B.P. (2023) Speaker, Provincial Police Chief (DIG)
- Inquiry Committee Report. (2012). Committee formed by the Ministry of Infrastructure Development and Transport on September 10, 2012 regarding the Kalikot bus accident, Report of the Inquiry Committee.
- Khatri, Y. (2023, April 21). Karnali has no roads, only death row. *Online news*. <https://www.onlinekhabar.com/2023/04/1295465>
- Ghimire, S (2023) Based on informal communication with Mayor, Karnali
- Dhakal, B. (2023) Based on informal communication, Kalikot
- Malla, C. (2023) Based on informal communication with DIG
- Rawat, P. (2023) Petition in the High Court advocating for the prevention and reduction of vehicular accidents. *INSEC*
- Shah, R. (2023) Based on informal communication, Nepal Police Highway Security and Traffic Management Office, Surkhet
- Shahi, N. (2023) Based on informal communication, Surkhet

