

Asian Highway a step forward in economic integration and cultural contact across a vast continent

(UNITED NATIONS NEW YORK, 20 April) A UN treaty-signing event 26-28 April in Shanghai, China, if successful, will ensure completion of a multi-pronged 140,000-kilometer highway corridor connecting 32 Asian nations and linking Europe to Asia. All regions and national economies should gain tremendously, including the region's low-income landlocked states, primary partners in the 2002 Almaty plan of action for landlocked and transit access countries.

The 26 April ceremony to mark the opening of the Asian Highway Agreement for signature will take place in the context of the sixtieth session of the UN Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific (ESCAP).

Experts relate the ultimate effect of the Asian Highway to the economic explosion that occurred in Europe after 1975, when the UN's Economic Commission for Europe engineered a similar arrangement for that region. For landlocked countries, the Highway portends a revival of the cross-continent access that the legendary Silk Route provided in the early part of the First Millennium.

Politically, the Asian Highway is likely to improve understanding and communication between peoples of countries spread over a huge landmass and separated by rugged mountains, deserts and maritime straits and disparate cultures and political traditions — "the same way it has happened in Europe, because of their road and rail links", said ESCAP Executive-Secretary Kim Hak-Su at a Bangkok press conference earlier this month.

The main corridor — Asian Highway One — starts in Tokyo and links, via ferry, with the Koreas and across the continent to Istanbul. A far western Asian Highway spur will reach to St. Petersburg, and from that Russian city to the border of Finland.

A new "Silk Route" for landlocked Asian Nations

The landlocked countries that would be linked more closely to seaports include Bhutan, Laos, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Mongolia, Nepal and Uzbekistan, according to ESCAP.

At a 15 April press conference at the United Nations in New York, Nobel Laureate Lawrence Klein named India and China as the two economic powerhouses of the developing world, as well as the resurgence of Japan and Russia as crucial features of the new global economic landscape. All four countries are involved in the Asian Highway project. Led by these countries, Asian trade surged by 40 per cent in the past year, according to ESCAP.

But trade and economic growth are not spread evenly through Asian countries.

"We see the importance of constructing transport linkage within the region in order to distribute development through all countries, not only to the developed ones," said ESCAP economist Raj Kumar.



Asian Highway Agreement



Road work needed

ESCAP initiated the idea of a pan-Asian highway system in 1959. The project immediately bogged down under political differences in the Cold War environment. But in 1992 with the launching of the Asian Land Transport Infrastructure Development (ALTID) project, the Commission revived efforts for an integrated network of highways that connect all member countries, in specific providing links for landlocked developing countries with seaports and with large potential trading partners such as China, India, Korea, Russia and Japan.

At the Seoul Ministerial Conference on Infrastructure held in 2001, the member states recognized and endorsed the need of formalization of the Asian Highway network through an intergovernmental agreement. The UN meeting in Almaty in 2003 served as additional impetus for agreement between landlocked and transit countries on the importance of integrated transport and the possibilities for cooperation, and the new Agreement is the most important early payoff of that Ministerial Conference of Landlocked and Transit Access Developing Countries.

The 32 participating countries agreed on the final text of an Intergovernmental Agreement on the Asian Highway Network on 18 November 2003. The next step is for Governments to sign the Agreement at the Shanghai meeting of ESCAP. Entry into force will occur 90 days after eight States have fully agreed to be bound by the terms of the Agreement. Currently, it is expected that 20 or so countries will sign on during the Shanghai meeting.

"All 32 countries have agreed in principle, but it will depend on passing this agreement individually through each country, so not everyone will be ready to sign in Shanghai," Mr. Kim said.

Much of the work of deciding on routes and upgrading highways to minimal standards has already been accomplished in Asia. Still, about 17% of the highways need to be upgraded. But to gain approval for the final routing plans and amendments of agreed routes, complete standardize signage and infrastructure improvements, improve facilities at border crossings, and develop all 55 highway routes to the agreed standards, the new Agreement is necessary.

A substantial part of the funding will come from the larger or more economically advantaged nations participating in the pact, and agencies such as the Asian Development Bank, World Bank, Japan Bank for International Cooperation (JBIC).

"The amount will be tremendous", Mr. Kim said, in ESCAP's home city of Bangkok, "and we propose public-private partnerships to fund this effort if governments cannot finance it. It will take a long time to complete, but we have to start somewhere."

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