

THE ASIAN HIGHWAY

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I. Introduction

Transportation has always played an important role in the process of economic development of all nations. Because of this, it has come to be recognised as one of the strategic infrastructures in every developing economy and the most discussed question regarding transport of our time is whether it should be designed only to service the development in other production sectors of the economy already underway, or should it also promote economic development and thus precede the development of other production sectors.

Until towards the end of the 1950's development plans of the countries in the region still focused on that role of transport which has the object of making feasible the goals established for other sectors of the economy. This may be mainly because of the urgent need to improve the transportation system immediately after the war, but gradually it has come to be realised that transport can and does promote economic development by providing access to natural resources, by extending markets, by attacking rural isolation, by promoting programmes of health and education and by multiplying the effectiveness of scarce personnel through increased mobility.

It was within this frame of thought that the Asian Highway project came about. The proposal to start the Asian Highway network was first considered at the meeting of ECAFE's Highway Transport Sub-committee in November 1958,¹ and was later approved by ECAFE member countries at the annual session in March 1959,² following the recognition that a road link between all countries in South Asia, which would eventually connect with the European and the Middle East road networks, could lead to great economic, social and administrative benefits. The ultimate aim of the Asian Highway, therefore, is to promote and contribute to

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¹Report of the meeting of the Highway Transport Sub. Committee, (November 1958).

²Report of the Annual Session (March 1959.)

the expansion of national and international trade and tourism, to stimulate economic development, to facilitate pilgrimage to holy places, and to open up new vistas for the regions where people are living in isolation.

II. The Asian Highway Project

The Asian Highway project was thus drawn up to connect the capitals and important seaports of the countries in South Asia, and at the same time, to provide access to important historical and other places of religious significance. The importance of establishing and developing adequate surface communication between the countries for economic, social and cultural progress was recognised. For the landlocked countries such as Afghanistan, Nepal and Laos, in particular, it was felt that an international highway network would provide the best means by which trade and commerce between them and the neighbouring countries could be developed, especially where topographical difficulties virtually precluded the possibilities of developing other modes of surface transport. The international highway system, therefore, was to be established by linking the existing main roads all the way between Iran, Vietnam, Malaysia, and subsequently the system was extended as far as Indonesia. The system, was also to be connected with the European Highway network at the border of Iran/Turkey and with the Middle East Highway network at the border of Iran/Iraq.³

Work priority was given, first to consideration of linking the existing road systems and second, to bringing the existing roads up to the agreed minimum standards. For this purpose, five standards were laid down, and the countries were required to conform to the lowest which was to be raised as and when traffic increases sufficiently and funds become available. The Asian Highway traffic code governing the conduct of international traffic was to be drafted and a uniform system of road signs agreed upon. Other features of the project were to promote the establishment of ancillary services, to ease frontier formalities, and to take such other steps as would develop international traffic. Eventually, the Asian Highway network will serve an area of about $6\frac{1}{2}$ million sq.km., with a population of more than 700 million. It comprises 83 routes, which totals 57,000 km., of which 34,000 k.m. forms the international priority routes. Following the European example, where international routes are prefaced with the letter E, the international routes of the Asian Highway system carry the letter A, standing for Asia.⁴

The planners of the Asian Highway system realized that the high cost of construction will make it impossible to develop immediately all the routes in each country to the standards of the international highways, and yet, at least one route connecting all the countries should be established as early as possible. Priorities, therefore, have been given to 11 routes⁵ (see next

³Report of the Asian Highway Coordination Committee Meeting, 1966.

⁴*Ibid.*

⁵*Ibid.*

section), the priority routes A-1 and A-2 being the most important arterial routes. The total length of priority route A-1 is 10,874 k.m. and that of A-2 is 12,380 km. Priority route A-1 starts from Bazargan, on the Turkish-Iran border and traverses 8 countries, starting from Iran, Afghanistan, West Pakistan, India, East Pakistan, Burma, Thailand, Cambodia and the Republic of Vietnam. Priority route A-2 goes through 9 countries, again starting from Iran, and goes through West Pakistan, India, Nepal, East Pakistan, Burma, Thailand, Malaysia, Singapore and Indonesia.

III. Current status of the Asian Highway

Since the Asian Highway project started in 1960, or the beginning of the U.N. Development Decade, considerable progress has been made in its implementation, especially in the construction and improvement of the national roads included in the Asian system. The approximate amount spent on these improvements during the period 1961-1967 was in the order of U.S.\$ 725 million.⁶ Current status of the priority routes is as follows:

A. Main arterial routes

1. *Priority route A-1* of the total length of 10,874 km., 10,109 km. (93 per cent) is above the minimum ECAFE standard and only 765 km. is substandard out of which 470 km. is missing link. The missing link is in Burma (Kalewa-Ye-U 122 km. and Takaw-Tachileik 348 km.) while the substandard portion is in Iran (Sang Bast-Afghan border 80 km.) and Burma (Tamu-Kalewa 145 km.)

2. *Priority route A-2* of the total length of 12,380 km. (excluding the portions overlapping with A-1 in Pakistan (East) and Thailand) of which 10,431 km. (84 per cent) are of or above minimum ECAFE standard; 1,949 km. is substandard of which 1,223 km. is missing link. The missing link is in India (Nepal border-Tanakpur, 5 km., Nepal border-Kharibari, 3 km.); Nepal (Banbasa-Butwal, 422., Butwal-Narayangarh, 122 km; Adhavar-Satighatta, 362 km); Burma (Maungdow-Kyauktow, 56 km., Myinbya-Taungup, 241 km.) and Singapore (Bt Mandri-Lim Chu kang Rd., 6 km; Mee Soon-Yio Chu kang, 6 km.)

B. Other arterial routes

3. *Priority route A-3* (3,118 km.) This runs from Burma (42km.) through Laos (1,428 km.) to Ha Tien in Vietnam (1,648 km.). The section west of Laung Prabang in Laos (356 km.) is almost non-existent.

4. *Priority route A-4* (2,808 km.) This runs from Agra in India (2,423 km.) to Colombo in Ceylon (385 km.) and is above ECAFE minimum standard.

⁶Report of the Transport and Communication Committee (Sixteenth Session) to the Commission (Twenty-fourth Session) 1968.

5. *Priority route A-10* (668 km.) This runs from Saigon to Qui Nhon in Vietnam and at both places A 10 links with A-3. It is above ECAFE minimum standard.
6. *Priority route A-11* (1116 km.) This runs from Suvannakhet in Laos (422 km.) to Sihanouk Ville in Cambodia (694 km.) and is of or above ECAFE minimum standard.
7. *Priority route A-12* (523 km.) This runs from Vientiane to Thanaleng (19 km.) in Laos to Nongkai to Saraburi in Thailand (504 km.) and is above ECAFE minimum standard.
8. *Priority route A-14* (1284 km.) This runs from Tak in Thailand through Pakse (846 km.) in Laos to Vietnam border (303 km.) and through Vietnam to Pleikee (135 km.) The missing link is in Thailand (151 km.) and Laos (Attapeu-border 37 km.)
9. *Priority route A-17* (284 km.) The whole section of this route is in Vietnam. It runs from Vinh Dien, where it is linked with A-3, to Tan Cahn, where it is linked with A-4. It is below the minimum ECAFE standard.
10. *Priority route A-40* (408 km.) This route is from Sylhet in East Pakistan to Imphal via Silchar, the last two being in India, is shorter than the present A-1 section between Sylhet and Imphal via Golaghat by 337 km. Pakistan's section (44 km.) is at present like a trail and has two major rivers to cross.
11. *Priority route A-77* (826 km.) This consists of partly dirt trail and partly gravel but as a whole it is a very rough trail

IV. Organization

1. *Expert Groups.* When the Asian Highway was approved in 1959, Expert groups, with an expert from each country, were formed to coordinate and follow-up the implementation of the project. The region being very large, was divided into 3 zones.** The Expert groups then met on zonal or joint basis.

2. *The Asian Highway Coordinating Committee.* Following the example of the Council of European Transport Ministers which has been an important factor in the successful development of the European Highway network, the Asian Highway Coordinating committee at the ministerial level was established at the ECAFE's annual session in March 1965, following the realization that, in view of the considerable progress made in implementing the project in member countries, the time has come for a more effective coordination of all the activities involved. The main functions of the Asian Highway Coordinating Committee, therefore were

**Zone 1 consists of Burma, Cambodia, Indonesia, Laos, Malaysia, Republic of Vietnam, Thailand and Singapore. Zone 2 consists of Ceylon, India, Nepal, Pakistan (East Wing). Zone 3 consists of Afghanistan, Iran and Pakistan (West wing).

to plan and coordinate the planning and implementation of the Asian Highway project. The first session of the Asian Highway Coordinating Committee was held at Bangkok in April 1965. The Committee laid down the policy that priority routes of the Asian Highway be commissioned as early as possible, which meant that, at least one route connecting all the countries should receive priority implementation, and that efforts should be made to complete it by 1970 or the end of the U.N. Development Decade. For this purpose, a Five Year plan was recommended.

3. *The Asian Highway Transport Technical Bureau.* By the time of its second session in 1966, it became quite clear that, the Asian Highway Coordinating Committee, which is a high-powered body, and meets only once a year, will need a full-time institutional support, if it were to fulfill its functions, and if all its recommendations were to be implemented effectively. The Coordinating Committee, therefore considered and signed an application to the UNDP⁷ (United Nations Development Programme), for financial assistance for its institutional support or the establishment of the Asian Highway Transport Technical Bureau which finally came into being early this year.

In the meantime, the Executive Secretary of ECAFE, who had foreseen the task ahead, established a small interim Transport Technical Bureau with the assistance of the United Nations Technical Assistance Programme and some cooperating countries (the Netherlands, Japan and the U.S.) The objectives of the Bureau are:⁸

1. To give advice to national highway authorities in the preparation of road studies and plans (including feeder roads and links with other mains of transportation and communication), and to assist, where appropriate, in requesting and co-ordinating external aid;
2. To promote the establishment or expansion of construction material testing facilities and field laboratories, and to encourage applied research into road building;
3. To create a wide range of training opportunities through fellowship awards training centres, seminar and study groups for all levels of personnel in the field of highway planning engineering, construction, maintenance and administration;
4. To function as a practical clearing house for information on road development and thus, to make available the results of research carried out in other parts of the region or of the world;
5. To prepare technical studies or subjects relating to the handling of international traffic and services.

⁷Report of the Asian Highway Coordinating Committee Meeting 1966.

⁸*ibid.*

Resource of the Bureau. The assistance from the UNDP, which amounts to approximately U.S.\$ 1.4 million, is to last for the period of 5 years, from 1968–1972.⁹ Like most of the U.N. projects, the assistance is in the form of expert services, fellowships and equipment, so as to enable the Asian Highway Transport Technical Bureau fulfill its main functions of giving advisory services, providing training opportunities and promoting highway research in member countries. The resource of the Asian Highway Transport Technical Bureau is however comparatively small in relation to its tasks. It is, therefore, expected that additional assistance will be provided to this office from interested countries and organizations.

4. *The Advisory Board to the Asian Highway Coordinating Committee.* The Preparatory Assistance Mission, which was appointed by the United Nations Development Programme to revise the original request by the countries for the institutional support to the Asian Highway Coordinating Committee in 1966,¹⁰ recommended that an Advisory Board consisting of a small number of experts of international renown be appointed to assist the Coordinating Committee on matters referred to it by the Committee and to guide the Transport Technical Bureau on specific matters. The Mission recommended that the experts should cover among them the fields of transport economics, research, highway administration, finance and construction and at least one member of the Board should be from the region while other members could be from outside the region.

The formation of the Advisory Board was therefore among the Asian Highway TTB's programme of work for the first project year and the first ad hoc meeting of the Board was held during 20–24 September 1968. The members of the Board include (1) Mr. Dewitt C. Greer, Professor of Highway and Transportation, University of Texas, U.S.A.; (2) Dr. S. Kobe, Technical Advisor, United Nations Headquarters, U.S.A.; (3) Mr. L. Odier, Chief, Highway Engineer and Deputy Director-General, Bureau Central pour les équipements d'Outre-Mer, France; (4) Dr. R. Millard, Deputy-Director of Road Research, Road Research Laboratory, Ministry of Transport, England and Mr. M.S. Ahmad, Director, Asian Highway Transport Technical Bureau

V. *The Tasks Ahead*

Since 1960 the routes and construction standards have been agreed upon. As far as possible, existing national roads have been included in the international network and governments have been requested to give priority to the upgrading of sub-standard sections and the filling in of the missing links. The standards set for construction contemplated a stage development so as to attain higher standard as traffic increases. A highway code governing the conduct of international traffic has been drafted and a uniform system of road signs has been agreed upon. Many reconnaissance surveys and studies have also been undertaken.

⁹Application for Institutional Support of the Asian Highway Transport Technical Bureau to the United Nations Development Programme 1966.

¹⁰*Ibid.*

It has already been stated that, at least one through route, connecting all the Asian Highway countries, is expected to be completed by 1970. For the countries to be able to do this, considerable amount of outside financial and technical aid would be required, despite maximum use of the countries' own resources. It was estimated that the total required aid would be about U.S.\$ 400 million (see Annex 1) in addition to about U.S.\$ 500 million to be provided by the countries themselves.

Even without this project, there is need, in any case, for the Asian countries to build up its own trunk roads. A study made about the relationship between the national income per head, and the required total volume of transportation by trains and motor vehicles in various countries in the world show that, national roads of the countries in this area should be 3-10 times the present length for a well-balanced economic development.

But the physical construction of the highway is not the only feature of the Asian Highway project. Additional effort is still needed to promote the international movement of people and exchange of goods if the highway were to bring closer the economies and the cultures of the different Asian countries and thus lead to prosperity and better understanding among the people of Asia. Therefore, concurrently with the filling up of missing links and the up-grading of the sub-standard portions, a publicity campaign to demonstrate the potentials of the Asian Highway must be conducted, and an early preparation must be made to facilitate the international movement of traffic. Ancillary services and facilities along the routes will also have to be planned, road maps and information booklets prepared, and ribbon development problems studied.

VI. Motor trips over the Asian Highway

There are some people who still think that the Asian Highway is a myth and they are right if they think in terms of very fast, super-highways like those in Europe which Asia will not be in a position to offer for many years to come. Because, as it was originally conceived, the Asian Highway would come into being only gradually, as existing roads were being improved and as funds were becoming available. Outside a few restricted circles, the Asian Highway is little known to the general public and large-scale publicity campaigns are needed badly.

A number of special parties therefore, have been organised from time to time for travel over the sections of the Asian Highway starting with the seven-men broadcasting team of the Radio Corporation of Japan (NHK) and the Australian Broadcasting Commission (ABC) which made a ten-week trip from Bazargan (Iran/Turkish border) to Dacca (Pakistan Eastern Wing).¹¹ This trip resulted in the production of valuable publicity material including newspaper articles on the Asian Highway and TV programmes in English and Japanese which were broadcast in many countries. In addition valuable suggestions and recommendations were also made on various aspects involved in the development of international traffic.

¹¹The Asian Highway, M.S. AHMAD, Director, Asian Highway Transport Technical Bureau 1968.

Another trip made under the auspices of the Asian Highway is that by Mr. William Tanzer who also accompanied the first team in 1964 while he was the Chief of the UN Information Service in Bangkok. During August–September 1967 Mr. Tanzer, who has become the Director of the UN Information Service in Tokyo made the trip on A-1 route of the Asian Highway, starting his journey in London and ending it in Calcutta. He was accompanied by his wife. His report and suggestions are now being studied

It has been stated earlier that the success of the Asian Highway projects depends not only on the enthusiasm of the countries concerned but also those outside the region. It is, therefore, rather encouraging to find that trips over the Asian Highway are also organised by the countries outside the region from time to time, the most notable ones being the Commonwealth Expedition, the purpose which is to encourage the movement of young men and women for better understanding between the people of Asia and Europe and to pave the way for regular bus service. The Commonwealth Expedition (Comex 1)¹² was organised in 1965, when 210 young men and women, mostly students from 12 Commonwealth countries travelled in six vehicles from London to Delhi over the Asian Highway to visit 25 universities in 15 countries. A similar expedition (Comex 2) was organized during July/September 1967 under the patronage of HRH the Duke of Edinburgh. This time 330 Commonwealth students in the United Kingdom from 21 countries—from universities, technical and training colleges and industries travelled in 11 vehicles over part of the Asian Highway route A-1 to visit 50 universities in 15 countries. Comex 2 arrived in Kabul during the third session of the Asian Highway Co-ordinating Committee. Colonel Gregory, the organizer of the expedition who had already travelled between London and Delhi during March–April 1967, over the route to be travelled by Comex 2, met the Executive Secretary of ECAFE and the members of the Co-ordinating Committee and discussed with them the different aspects of the Asian Highway route.

Reliability Trial With a view to attracting worldwide attention to the Asian Highway and its potentialities for the ECAFE region as a whole, Sir Arthur Harold Tang, the Australian leader to the annual session of ECAFE in March/April 1966 proposed that a race or vehicle reliability trial between cars, trucks and buses be organised over the Asian Highway at a convenient time. This proposal was supported at the Asian Highway Coordinating Meeting in the same year when it was recommended that such trial should be held in 1970 and perhaps motor rally should be organised earlier over shorter lengths already completed, such as from Vientiane to Singapore via Bangkok and Kuala Lumpur. As regard to the latter, a committee of the representatives of Laos, Malaysia, Singapore and Thailand has been established through which the Vientiane-Singapore Motor Rally has been successfully arranged in March 1969.

¹²*ibid.*

VII. Conclusion

The success of the Asian Highway project depends on the willingness and enthusiasm with which the countries concerned cooperate to implement the project as well as the interest generated in the people at large. Due to paucity of funds in all developing countries, it would not be possible for these countries to spend on the Asian Highway project a very much higher amount than the minimum required. The UN assistance to this project is also very limited and nothing can be allocated for any construction activity. It is possible only to provide for such preliminary schemes as will help and activate the national urge for completing the project. Such schemes can be reconnaissance survey, preinvestment survey, training programmes, seminars, fellowships, assistance to testing and research laboratories etc., all of which are reflected in TTB work programme within the coming year.

To reiterate, the Asian Highway system is not a network of super highways, but only the joining of existing national roads to form the international links. Each country is constructing its own roads, and they face many difficulties, such as lack of funds, materials equipment and technical knowhow. It is the task of problems and also to initiate some actions which would lead to the materialisation of the Asian Highway as originally conceived. What international action can do is to arouse the widespread interest in the project and to give financial and technical assistance as and when required, so that the Asian Highway can really be the symbol of Asian unity, progress and partnership.

ANNEX I EXTERNAL AID REQUIRED

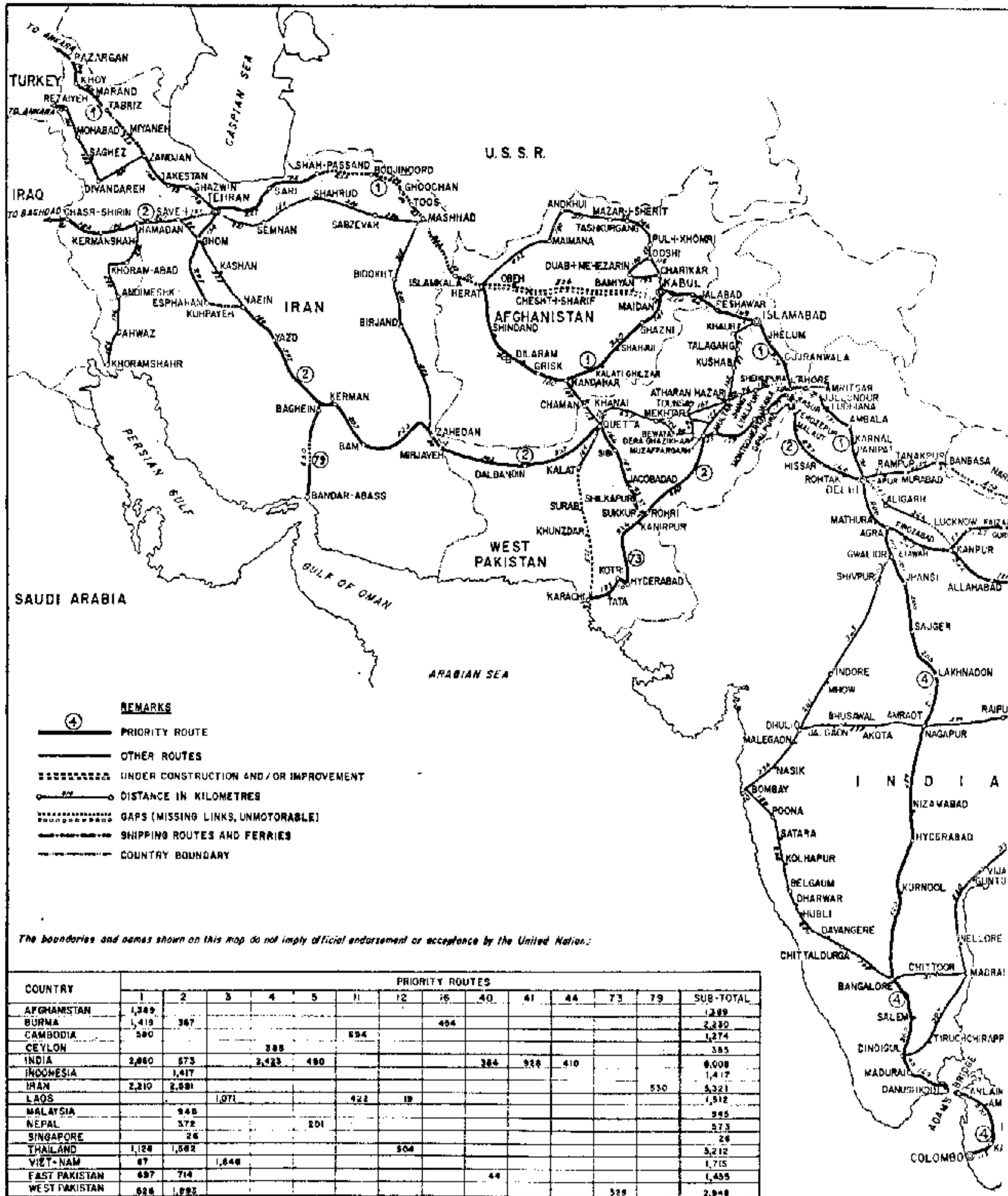
For the sections below the minimum ECAFE standard and for improvements to meet heavy traffic

Country	For Up-grading	For Improvement	Total U.S.\$ (million)
Iran	.60	60.0	60.60
Afghanistan	-	114.08	114.08
Pakistan	1.00	27.89	28.89
India	1.10	-	1.10
Ceylon	10.00	5.0	15.00
Nepal	7.00	-	7.00
Malaysia	-	12.00	12.00
Singapore	-	2.00	2.00
Laos	16.00	52.00	68.00
Vietnam	15.76	113.28	129.04
Indonesia	-	2.30	2.30
Total	51.46	388.55	440.01

SUMMARY OF PROGRESS MADE SINCE 1961

	Route No.													Total			Remarks	
	A-1		A-2		A-3		A-11		A-12		A-14		P					U
	P	U	P	U	P	U	P	U	P	U	P	U						
Estimated cost US\$ million	400		240		42		32		10		3		727					
Status in 1967	8943	10059	6861	8961	1546	2203	1106	1116	523	523	82	188	19061	23050				
% of completion in 1967	82	93	65	82	50	71	99	100	100	100	19	43	71	86				
Total length	10874		10898		3094		1116		523	523	438		26943					
% of work completed during 1961-1967	66	48	38	33	45	8	81	32	71	-	19	4	52	35				

Source : Asian Highway Transport Technical Bureau.



The boundaries and names shown on this map do not imply official endorsement or acceptance by the United Nations.

COUNTRY	PRIORITY ROUTES														SUB-TOTAL
	1	2	3	4	5	11	12	16	40	41	44	73	79		
AFGHANISTAN	1,349														1,349
BURMA	1,419	367												494	2,890
CAMBODIA	580					894									1,474
CEYLON				388											388
INDIA	2,060	673		2,423	490				384	928	410				6,008
INDONESIA		1,417													1,417
IRAN	2,210	2,891											530		5,321
LAOS			1,071			422	19								1,512
MALAYSIA		945													945
NEPAL		372			201										573
SINGAPORE		26													26
THAILAND	1,128	1,582								904					3,212
VIET-NAM	87		1,848												1,715
WEST PAKISTAN	697	714							44						1,455
TOTAL	10,874	10,460	2,719	2,808	651	1,116	523	454	408	928	410	529	530		32,410

SCHEMATIC MAP OF PROPOSED
ASIAN HIGHWAY (REVISED)

