Trucking a tragedy waiting to happen

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By Denis Droppa

Johannesburg - The horrific truck accident that claimed four lives in Alberton last week, along with the one in Pinetown last year that killed 24 people, were stark reminders of the carnage that a lorry can cause.

The gods are not without a sense of irony in that the Alberton crash, one of SA's worst crashes in recent times, took place during National Transport Month.

In both cases it's claimed the trucks were unroadworthy and had faulty brakes.

They were accidents waiting to happen, but similar incidents are all but inevitable as it's become clear that South African roads are littered with badly-maintained, overloaded trucks driven by often poorly-trained drivers.

And the worst part is that little is being done about it by road-safety authorities.

When trucking magazine FleetWatch visited the Marianhill test centre in KwaZulu-Natal to witness roadworthiness tests a few weeks after the Pinetown accident, 29 of the 41 trucks taken off the roads failed - a shocking 70 percent.

NO BRAKES

FleetWatch editor Patrick O'Leary says: "One really would have thought that the Field's Hill accident would have acted as a wake-up call to truck operators around the country. Yet here we were again seeing trucks driving under full load with no brakes and a host of other faults deeming them totally unfit for use."

When asked how he got down Van Reenen's Pass without brakes, one truck driver said he used his gears.

Through the magazine's ongoing Brake & Tyre Watch campaign to test truck roadworthiness, 341 of the 491 trucks tested (69.5 percent) have been discontinued and taken off the road so far. It's a "horrendous and unacceptable failure rate", says O'Leary.

Apart from headline-grabbing incidents such as Field's Hill and the N12 crash in Alberton, the evidence of poorly-maintained trucks is underlined by the large number of broken-down lorries on our roads.

Hardly a day goes by without a stationary juggernaut causing a traffic jam on a major urban route, and the blame is laid on truck operators who skimp on maintenance costs.

SHORTAGE OF SKILLED DRIVERS

There is also a shortage of skilled truck drivers in the country, with operators complaining that they battle to find well qualified, professional drivers, as truck driving isn't an attractive career path for youngsters.

There is reportedly a shortage of 3000 drivers in the South African transport industry, and due to the shortage of skills, many transport operators take the credentials presented by new recruits on face value without adequate verification of their skills. The fact that the driver responsible for the Alberton crash was convicted of two similar offences before is a shocking indictment of a lack of standards in the industry.
is it that he was still working as a truck driver?

Furthermore, a large portion of fleet managers do not have the capacity to take their drivers to training courses, and much needed vehicle familiarisation training before putting a driver behind the wheel, due to staff shortages. There is also the fear that skilled drivers will be poached by competitors.

The driver shortage presents a further road safety risk as many drivers spend long hours behind the wheel, leading to fatigue which becomes a hazard on our roads.

**RECIPE FOR DISASTER**

This recipe for disaster is exacerbated by the ever-growing volumes of trucks on our roads. The deregulation of freight movement in South Africa in the late eighties led to a move away from rail to road transportation. This, and shortcomings in SA’s old and decrepit rail system, have led to more than 80 percent of all goods being transported by road today. This causes a burden on our road infrastructure, both in congestion and road damage.

It’s reported that the N3 highway between Gauteng and KZN is under such pressure from trucks that there are only three hours a day when the number of cars exceed the number of trucks on this road.

Moving more cargo-haulage back to trains will be partially addressed by a road-to-rail strategy which will see Transnet spending R312-billion on upgrading its locomotives and railway lines over the next several years. The aim is to reduce the overuse of roads by increasing the amount of cargo shifted by rail, particularly in long-haul transportation. But in the meantime little seems to be done about improving the safety of trucks on our roads. Apart from truck roadworthiness campaigns such as FleetWatch magazine’s, traffic enforcement in this country is focused on financially lucrative speed trapping.

**ACCREDITATION SYSTEM**

The infrastructure is in place - and there are weigh bridges along the roads to test for overloaded trucks - but the number of unroadworthy trucks found in FleetWatch’s spot checks underlines there’s more to be done.

A Road Management Transport System has been implemented as an accreditation system, much like the South African Bureau of Standards mark of approval, which is awarded to truck fleets that abide by a set of operating standards ranging from vehicle maintenance, prevention of overloading, driver wellness and training. RTMS is currently only a voluntary standard, however.

Apart from vehicle fitness, driver training is one of the single biggest interventions that can reduce the number of buses and trucks causing carnage. There are devices on the market which allow trucking companies to monitor their drivers - such as Cartrack’s Drive Vision which allows fleet managers to take a virtual ride with their drivers - but their use isn’t compulsory.

According to the Justice Project South Africa, a resolution was adopted at the 2013 Road Safety Summit held by transport minister Dipuo Peters for the requirements and standards of Professional Driving Permits to be reviewed and legislation amended. However, no progress has been made after a year, leading to the 2014 Summit being cancelled. We can only hope the Alberton crash will spur the Department of Transport into some urgency.

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