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Despite ban, trailers still a problem in Lagos

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Despite the law banning them from certain routes, still extant in Lagos State, articulated vehicles known as trailers are not only violating the law with impunity, but also making the roads crimson with blood of Lagosians while government appears totally helpless. **Ayomide Owonibi** reports.

The latest tanker incident at Ajah which killed some primary school

pupil has driven to the stratosphere, calls by many for more stringent laws regarding the lives and safety of citizens.

Though the incident was more of a case of the apparent lack of a pedestrian bridge in the area, there is still need for binding laws against heavy-duty trucks. If not for the timely intervention of the police, the Ajah incident would have turned bloody. Avoidable killings by such articulated vehicles have become a common-place in Lagos as revealed by this statistics.

July 15, 2012: Tragedy struck at Ikeja along Bus Stop on Lagos-Abeokuta Expressway, Lagos State, after a heavily loaded 40-foot container truck fell on a government meat van and crushed a passerby and wounded several others.

Eyewitnesses said the truck had swerved off the road to avoid colliding with some policemen, who were chasing a motorcycle rider, before the incident occurred around 9 a.m. The victim, identified as Samuel Ogunnaiké, was an employee of a popular phone dealer in Computer Village, Ikeja and was on his way to the office when he met his death. Any hope that he could survive the accident was dashed after he was trapped for about four hours before his body was retrieved from the wreckage.

The Eko Meat Van, with number plate XY 433 AA was leveled after one of the containers fell on it. The driver and three passengers in the vehicle, however, escaped with injuries.

January 8, 2013: A container-laden trailer crushed a driver's mate to death. The man died when the rear tyres of a truck rolled backwards and crushed his head to a pulp, killing him instantly.

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March 19 2013: A container on the back of a trailer fell on a Mazda car on the Lagos-Badagry expressway killing one person. Both vehicles were said to be on their way to Badagry. An occupant of the car with registration number, NJ 339 ARB, died in the accident while the other occupants escaped with varying injuries. Both vehicles were reported to have been on top speed trying to negotiate a pothole on a bad portion of the road when the container fell from the trailer.

Austin Ahigbe who witnessed the accident said, "There were five passengers in the car, but only one of them died." He added that they were able to gather that occupants of the car were coming from Ibadan and heading to Seme, Benin Republic to trade.

November 18, 2013: There was serious pandemonium on Ajah Road as area boys and passers-by clashed with policemen after a trailer crushed five pupils as they were crossing the road.

The sad incident happened close to Ikota Primary School and the dead pupils are believed to be making their way to the school when they were killed. The tanker driver abandoned his truck and escaped. The protesters blamed the gruesome accident on the lack of a pedestrian bridge in the area.

November 19, 2013: An unidentified young woman was crushed to death by a speeding trailer right under the pedestrian bridge at toll gate bus-stop in Lagos. The accident which happened around 9 a.m. caused a major gridlock as men of the Federal Road Safety Corps (FRSC) tried to divert traffic while also making arrangements to clear the corpse.

According to an eye witness who simply gave her name as Uche, the tragic incident occurred as the young lady who was said to be in her twenties tried to cross the expressway.

"The lady who was in company of her sister dashed across the express and was immediately hit by an oncoming trailer which lifted her up and dashed her to the ground in the process severing her head from her body. It was a very gory sight as blood was everywhere. The driver of the trailer, however, did not wait to take responsibility for his actions," she said.

The list of trailer and container accidents in Lagos is so overwhelmingly long with these tragic fatalities occurring within a span of two to three days.

Many drivers in Lagos literally drive with their hearts in their mouths whenever they are close to a trailer or a long vehicle carrying a container. Their reasons for being afraid vary, either due to an awful experience or a close shave with death which involved these menace on the highway.

Opinions vary on the causes of regular accident of containers falling on other vehicles in transit. While the poor state of roads characterised by potholes is considered in some quarters as the major cause, the odd attitude of drivers of the trailers is seen as another factor.

While some blame owners of the trucks for employing drivers with questionable characters, others condemn the attitude of the government to the plight of its citizens by refusing to implement laws that would prevent heavy duty vehicles from plying commercial routes during the day.

According to Section 2, subsections 1 and 2 of the traffic law, "no trailer other than petrol tankers and long vehicles used in conveying passengers shall enter into or travel within the metropolis of Lagos between the hours of 6 a.m. and 9 p.m.

"Also any driver who is found contravening the provisions of this section shall have his vehicle impounded by a duly authorised officer of the authority and shall upon conviction be liable to a fine of N50, 000 or a term of imprisonment for six months or both."

This, according to Governor Raji Fashola, was to restore sanity to the road which is usually characterised by chaotic atmosphere.

He stated that the concern of his government was not about making arrests but changing attitude by the strength of advocacy for the values of compliance.

"And that is what we want to focus on in the short term. In the medium term, some increased enforcement and in the long term, total, uncompromising zero-tolerance. By that time, we would have more people voluntarily complying," he said.

Also expressing his views, the Chairman of Association of Maritime Truck Owners, Chief Remi Ogungbemi, however, described the law as a bait to nail drivers.

He argued that the government did not consider the danger in night travel which the law has forced on them.

He further said that the law would cripple port operations, arguing that it was not the best the state could get because it would have a negative economic implication on the nation owing to the fact that the port is the second largest income earner for the nation.

"Everybody knows that our drivers are facing the problem of hijackers in night journey. That has made us to encourage day journey. But now with the restrictions, it is sending them back to the den of these criminals. That is the situation. Government should have provided terminals where the

trailers will park to prevent parking on the side of highways before coming out with this law. But see how they did it? It is obnoxious," he said.

Sector Commander of Federal Road Safety Commission (FRSC), Nseobong Akpabio, however pointed out that the law was a positive development as well as a complementary legal instrument to sanitise the road.

He lauded the Lagos State government for taking the bull by the horns in order to reduce avoidable auto-crashes on the road.

Regarding the container carrier trailers, he said FRSC had been meeting with the stakeholders in haulage business with a view to finding solution to the incessant accidents caused by their vehicles on the road.

"Because we cannot continue to watch things degenerating, that is why we are improving on our campaign to seek understanding of the stakeholders. And with the new traffic law, we will achieve results faster than expected. Our advice meanwhile is that other road users should not drive too close to trailers carrying containers. They should at least give two seconds gap between their vehicle and the trailer," he said.

Officials of the Lagos State Traffic Management Authority (LASTMA) who are empowered to implement these laws, have been observed to be looking the other way in many instances.

For many, the introduction of the law brought a form of relief which was short-lived due to the fact that despite complying with the law for a while, many of these trailers laden with ill-fitted containers and over speeding tankers have now made highways in Lagos their turf, as they speed recklessly weaving in and out of traffic like snakes.

It is bad enough that the trailers and tankers have refused to comply with government rules, but worse is the attitude of the drivers who behave like kings of the road who are ready to crush anything in their paths. The ill-fitted containers hanging precariously at the backs of some of these heavy duty vehicles is certainly a cause for alarm, as the containers tilt dangerously from side to side when the vehicles come in contact with potholes.

Many have raised questions on why the Lagos State government would purposely turn a blind eye to the menace these trailers and containers cause on the highway even after clearly stating in the law that some forms of heavy duty trucks are not to ply the road by day.

According to Akin Joseph, a trailer driver with over 15 years experience, government more than any other body, deserves the blame for the accidents which keep recurring at an alarming rate.

Joseph, who claimed to have on several occasions come close to being involved in such accidents, attributed the accident to the dilapidated state of the roads.

"If our government decides to fix the bad roads today, you will see that accidents would be reduced. Most of the trailers involved are just victims of the bad road. While their drivers are trying to avoid potholes, the weight of the container may just be too much to control and before the driver can maneuver, the container is already on its way down, falling on the vehicle near it," he noted.

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