

STATEMENT ISSUED BY THE MINISTER OF TRANSPORT, FIKILE MBALULA, ON THE OCCASION OF THE RELEASE OF EASTER FATALITIES STATISTICS ON 17 APRIL 2020

This year's Easter holidays came against the backdrop of the COVID-19 pandemic, which led to a nation-wide lockdown announced by the President. The consequence of this lockdown is the significant reduction of movement on our roads as prescribed by our Directions. The reduction of vehicle movement on our roads is estimated to be above 70%.

Equally, we release these statistics two days after a tragic road crash involving a minibus taxi and a truck in the Eastern Cape, which claimed 15 lives. I take this opportunity to send heartfelt condolences to the families and loved ones of the deceased. I also wish a speedy recovery to those injured in the collision.

This accident sadly demonstrates wilful and dangerous disregard for our collective effort to preserve human life by obeying both the road and lockdown rules by some public transport operators.

Although we have published Directions that specifically limit the maximum number of passengers who may be transported in a taxi, the driver of the minibus involved in this collision ignored those Directions. However, an investigation on the root cause of the crash is still underway and the RTMC will release the findings once finalized. This crash happened outside of the Easter period, but the tragic loss of so many lives warrants our attention and intervention. The Easter period this year was defined as the period starting on Thursday 9 April to Monday 13 April.

Our traffic law enforcement authorities had done extensive preparations for this period, which is ordinarily characterized by high traffic volumes to places of pilgrimage and holidays. However, these plans were disrupted by the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic on our shores.

This meant that schools had to close early, Easter pilgrimages cancelled, and a ban imposed on travelling between metros, districts and provinces. Because of these measures, the number of vehicles dropped significantly over the Easter period, as the majority of people stayed at home in compliance with the lockdown regulations.

A reduction in traffic volumes also had a corresponding effect on the number of traffic violations. The number of drivers arrested for drunken driving was 11, while the number of drivers caught speeding stood at 1. This is in sharp contrast with 807 arrested for drunken driving and 192 for speeding in 2019. However, any attempt to compare year-on-year figures will be an exercise in futility as the material conditions this Easter are fundamentally different from a normal period where traffic is able to move freely.

The total number of arrests for violation of road traffic laws stood at 719, while traffic law enforcement authorities manned 480 roadblocks. A total of 104,140 vehicles were stopped and checked at these roadblocks. The number of vehicles impounded was 236 with 171 vehicles discontinued due to unroadworthiness.

Over the same period in 2019, the number of arrests for violation of road traffic laws was 1,343, with 141 roadblocks. The number of vehicles impounded was 1,055, while vehicles discontinued for unroadworthiness stood at 702.

In addition to enforcing road traffic laws, authorities had to enforce the lockdown regulations and directions. As a consequence, 184 vehicles were stopped and ordered to return home for traveling in contravention of the lockdown regulations and directions.

As at the end of the Easter weekend, 26 fatal crashes were recorded, which resulted in 28 fatalities. Most crashes involved pedestrians and single vehicles overturned, with contributions of 38% and 19% respectively.

This is in contrast with the 128 crashes recorded over the same period in 2019, claiming 162 lives. Drivers constituted 42% of fatalities followed by pedestrians at 31% and passengers at 27%.

The 2020 Easter period was extraordinary as there was limited movement. Despite the lockdown there were those allowed to travel. The Provincial breakdown of the 26 crashes is as follows:

Mpumalanga - 6 crashes resulting in 7 fatalities
KwaZulu-Natal - 5 crashes resulting in 6 fatalities
Eastern Cape - 5 crashes resulting in 5 fatalities
Gauteng - 3 crashes resulting in 3 fatalities
Western Cape - 3 crashes resulting in 3 fatalities
North West - 3 crashes resulting in 3 fatalities
Limpopo - 1 crash resulting in 1 fatality
Free State – 0
Northern Cape – 0

A number of Major crashes recorded prior to the Easter season were investigated by the Road Traffic Management Corporation (RTMC), and a number of these investigations have since been completed.

- The investigation into a collision involving a Toyota Avanza and a Toyota Hi-ace minibus on 11 March 2020 has been completed. The crash happened on the R553 Golden Highway in Gauteng and claimed 12 lives of scholars, including both drivers. The investigation concluded that the driveshaft of the minibus vehicle broke off, causing the driver to lose control of the vehicle. The finding is that this crash occurred as a result of the poor maintenance of the Toyota Hi-ace minibus. The minibus was not roadworthy and its licence disk had expired 5 years earlier. In view of this, we have pressed for charges of culpable homicide. We will further intensify our visibility in scholar transport. This will also include closer collaboration with the Department of Basic Education to ensure that no school allows children to be transported in unroadworthy vehicles.

We will be introducing a new requirement that those involved in transporting scholars must, on a quarterly basis, subject themselves to compliance tests and must submit a compliance certificate to the school. Our law enforcement authorities will subject scholar transport operators to heavy scrutiny and rigorously enforce compliance. We will ensure that all unroadworthy vehicles are impounded. We are currently consulting with MECs to increase impoundment fee to a minimum of R10 000 for first time offenders.

- On 2 March 2020, a total of 25 people lost their lives when a bus carrying 98 occupants went down a steep slope in Qolweni near Centane in the Eastern Cape. The investigation found that human error was the most likely root cause of the crash. The driver overtook a light delivery vehicle and as he returned to the left of the road, he oversteered and lost control of the bus. The bus then left the gravel road, tipped over and slid down a slope. A full comprehensive mechanical investigation found no mechanical defects or failures in the bus. The road was found to be in a fair condition and not likely to have been the cause of the crash. The investigation further revealed that the certificate of roadworthiness of the bus had expired in December 2019, but it had continued operating in contravention of the law.

Similarly, the licence disk of the bus had expired and the bus was therefore not supposed to be on the road. Our law enforcement will ensure compliance with road traffic laws and will put in place robust measures to ensure full compliance by all bus operators. Buses that fail to comply with these measures will be impounded and heavy penalties handed down on operators. A case of culpable homicide had been opened and we will ask the courts for harsher penalties. Had this bus not been on the road, this tragic accident would not have happened. We are forging ahead with our proposal to reclassify certain offenses so that for this type of accident, those found culpable are charged with murder rather than culpable homicide.

- In January 2020, a driver and five passengers died in a bus crash on the R81 at Ga-Segopo village in Limpopo. The investigation found that human error was the most likely root cause of the crash. The driver failed to engage a lower gear to enable safe travelling on a steep downhill road. She subsequently lost control of the bus and it overturned. A full mechanical examination of the bus found no mechanical defects and the road was found to be in good condition.

- On 16 June 2019, 24 people were killed when a bus and a minibus were involved in a head-on collision on the R81 near Maphalle Village in Limpopo. The investigation found that the road was in a good condition and visibility was good when the crash occurred. The driver of the minibus was in a process of overtaking on a barrier line when he crashed head-on with an oncoming bus. Both vehicles were found to be in a mechanical sound condition, but the minibus was found to have been overloaded by 10. It had the seating capacity of 15 persons but carried 25. The investigation report concluded that the driver of the minibus was reckless in overtaking on a curve and over a barrier line. A case of culpable homicide case was opened. We are also pursuing the issue of personal liability of the owner of the vehicle. It was clear that the driver was driving under the influence of liquor and the vehicle was overloaded. Equally, the reclassification of offenses will enable us to ensure we charge those culpable in terms of schedule 5, which carries harsher penalties. drunken driving should be in schedule 5. Drunken driving is one of the offences that we want reclassified as a Schedule 5 offense in terms of the Criminal Procedure Act.

These reports demonstrate a blatant disregard of the rules of the road by some motorists, with tragic consequences. All these crashes could have been avoided if the drivers conducted themselves responsibly.

We would also like to reflect on the regulations that give effect to the lockdown. The Disaster Management Regulations published by the Minister of Co-operative Governance and Traditional Affairs (COGTA), Minister Nkosazana Dlamini-Zuma, remain in force and have been extended for the duration of the extended lockdown period. This extension includes the Directions we have issued covering all modes of transport.

Yesterday, Minister Nkosazana Dlamini-Zuma published amendments to these Regulations to lay the foundation for the risk-adjusted measures that will enable a phased recovery of the economy, allowing the return to operation of certain sectors under strictly controlled conditions.

The amended regulations make it clear that the transportation of essential goods are permitted from warehousing sites to essential service providers; cargo may be moved from ports of entry to warehousing sites where handling and clearing of cargo is conducted, with the exception of the transportation of liquor; and cargo may be transported to ports of entry for purposes of exporting. We specifically make provision for export of cargo to decongest the ports.

Now that all cargo is allowed to move, we have to be alive to the practical implications of this, particularly the domino effect on the value chain. The unintended consequence of this movement is that inbound cargo gets stuck at port, as some businesses that are required to enable the movement of this cargo to their final destination are not operational during the lockdown, resulting in high storage costs for businesses. Our ports of entry are not designed to function as warehouses for inbound cargo and this then creates a blockage at port.

Similarly, Minister Dlamini-Zuma announced that “Stores selling hardware products and vehicle components may open but must maintain a register of persons buying essential goods listed in the regulations.”

As part of this process, we have taken stock of the efficacy of the measures we have put in place to enable the lockdown. In extending the lockdown for a further 2 weeks, we have identified areas that pose unmitigated risks that require adjustment.

In relation to movement of minibus taxis, our law enforcement counterparts flagged a critical challenge that once taxis complete their morning run between 5 to 10am, these taxis park at the rank resulting in a mass gathering of drivers at these ranks which is prohibited. These taxis should be parked at places where they ordinarily park overnight, and drivers should return to their homes to avoid indirect gatherings. We will attend to this matter immediately.

Our law enforcement efforts will continue to enforce the lockdown rules and ensure compliance by all road users. Enforcement of the rule of the road will continue in earnest in order to maintain law and order on our roads.

Issued by: Fikile Mbalula
MINISTER OF TRANSPORT