

SPEECH NOTES BY KZN MEC FOR TRANSPORT, COMMUNITY SAFETY AND LIAISON MR WILLIES MCHUNU DURING THE ENGEN DRIVER AWARDS CEREMONY AT HILTON HOTEL – DURBAN ON FRIDAY 14 OCTOBER 2011.

Programme Director;
CEO of the Engen Petroleum;
All Management of the Engen Petroleum;
Distinguished guests;
Members of the media;
Protocol Observed;

Ladies and gentlemen, I would like to express my sincere appreciation to you for allowing me to join you here this evening to celebrate and give honour to the work and dedication demonstrated by Engen Petroleum, particularly in developing drivers to drive safely.

As Government, we are grateful to you for rallying behind our October Transport Month activities. We know that this is the month where we have a strong focus on all areas of transportation, namely the user, operator and infrastructure, with particular emphasis on Road Safety.

Programme Director, the Government of KwaZulu-Natal is deeply concerned about the increase in the number of fatalities the province has experienced during the past few months on our roads.

We take it as a very abnormal situation that from the 1st of August 2011 to date our province alone has had some 420 fatalities and 345 crashes. And the number continues to increase daily. This is an unacceptably high number of people to die in such a short space of time.

Even during the political violence that we experienced in our country in the past years, particularly KwaZulu-Natal, we did not lose so many people in this manner.

We are pleased therefore that this Engen Driver Awards initiative falls directly in line with our quest to influence road-user behaviour which seems to be the major cause of the scourge. We hope that the participating drivers have not entered for the sake of competing, but also to help us meet our target of reducing crashes and ultimately making our roads safer.

For those who may not be aware, as a country, we have set ourselves a target of reducing road fatalities by 50% by 2020 as per the Decade of Action on Road Safety proclaimed by the United Nations. The whole world is united behind endeavours to curb road deaths drastically between 2011 and 2020.

As I am given to understand that Engen Petroleum has 420 drivers countrywide, I want to believe that at least the same amount of truck drivers on South Africa's roads have had a chance to improve their driving skills. It is reassuring to hear that every year these drivers get an opportunity to renew their commitment to excellence on our roads.

Such competition serves as an incentive for the business sector to invest in advanced heavy duty vehicles driver-training. The skilled drivers contribute to saving human lives and the reduction of vehicle maintenance costs, including fleet management.

My wish would be that this initiative is replicated by all other companies in the freight industry. We don't have to end up preaching to the converted only, just to revive their conscience on matters of safety. We have less developed operators who do not have the willingness or inclination to invest in driver safety and vehicular roadworthiness.

We know that your industry has a number of illegal operators who continue to undermine the image of your industry and give it the unfortunate reputation of being serious killers on our roads simply because their vehicles and/or drivers are not fit to be on the road. This includes illegal operators who can't even afford to put proper brakes in their vehicles, let alone safe tires.

We really need to focus on educating drivers about human relations and tolerance on the road. We need to do away with the perception that South African drivers are bad drivers and show that we can be good drivers who are sensitive to road safety.

I am saying this because clearly, the developments and opportunities in road freight transport since the inception of democracy in our country have led to tight competition in the trucking industry.

The vehicle population has increased and companies have become profit-driven, tending to overload vehicles, neglect vehicle maintenance and promote working conditions that compel drivers to speed on the road.

Our recent truck defects inspection revealed that a number of truckers still do not comply with traffic laws of the country. There are reprobates who are unfairly dirtying the name of some stunning operators such as Engen and others like you. These people are dangerous to your business, and of course the entire motoring population as well as society at large.

These are people who have not been unfortunate to see what we see on a daily basis when we attend to road crash situations. They have no clue about the impact of road crashes on people who are left behind.

These are people who I wish could change their attitudes towards road safety and trucking before they experience the pain of having a loved one trapped in the wreck of the vehicle because it had no brakes.

I must congratulate Engen Petroleum for being one of the finest transport service providers in the country, with a focus on building driver capacity. The improved driving standards and skills, enhancing customer service whilst keeping a high awareness level of Health, Safety, Environment and Quality (HSEQ) are commendable.

It is indeed comforting to know that government is not alone in tackling this extraordinary task at hand. Whether we are looking at public-private partnerships, or state-civil society co-operation, or government and big business working together, we are getting closer to an inevitable destiny that must be reflected in the things we do to earn the status of being regarded as one of the most promising developing nations of the world.

To that end Programme Director, a significant milestone was recorded in the history of traffic law enforcement in KwaZulu-Natal in July this year. We saw the formation of the Integrated Traffic Law Enforcement Committee (ITLEC) that is working towards attaining the goal of preventing road crashes and offences that lead to fatalities on our roads.

This ITLEC is driving the integrated provincial traffic enforcement initiatives and programmes as well as engaging in continuous research aimed at finding new ways to curb the high levels of road crashes and fatalities.

They have already begun to look into whether we can successfully confiscate vehicles of repeat offenders. They are also working on taking to national forums the issue of a device that will prevent vehicles from exceeding the speed limit.

We have also come out in support of the National Prosecuting Authority (NPA) in the province for changing their attitude towards cases involving fatalities on our roads. Two drivers who killed passengers in large numbers because they failed to observe the basic rules of the road by crossing the barrier line in Kokstad and Pietermaritzburg respectively, have been charged with murder.

In South Africa this is a major breakthrough for the cause of safety on our roads. It sends the long-overdue message to the driver that if you fail to obey traffic rules you will kill people and be treated like any other murderer.

As a province, we have always maintained that culpable homicide cases must be treated as murder when people die as a result of carelessness, carelessness and recklessness or driver incompetence.

But as Government, we understand that we will always encounter opposition as we try to come up with solutions that will benefit our people.

We understand also that in life any proposed change can be expected to be met with resistance.

We have been pleased however, to hear some of our stakeholders coming out in support of the proposal to treat drivers who kill people on the road as murderers. Maybe our appeal to all of you here is that instead of being too critical of our Government's proposal in the interest of your safety, rather come forward with yours and let us see how we can move forward together.

In your case as transporters of a flammable product like petrol, care and safety are of paramount importance because a mistake made by a driver would spell out disaster e.g. a quicker loss of human life, property and money since crashed vehicles go up in flames easily. We all know what happens when a petrol tank is in flames.

Before I conclude, I would like to touch on the issue of HIV and AIDS. Several studies have revealed that since our truck drivers move from place to place, they therefore become potential catalysts in the transmission of HIV which causes AIDS.

As a result, the transport industry, among other industries, is also associated with the HIV and AIDS pandemic in the province and indeed in the entire country. Perceptions are rife within our communities that the South African transport industry, especially trucking enjoys 'liberated' lifestyle, and is therefore arguably more liable to this pandemic than any other sector because employees stay away from their families for longer.

We therefore appeal to all our truck drivers here to take a stand and work towards changing this negative perception. Try to abstain or practise safer sex so that your industry will not be without experienced drivers who can work on our roads without causing unnecessary crashes.

Finally, let me take this opportunity to thank all Engen drivers who are contributing to correcting the perception about this sector. Today we proudly celebrate the achievements of Engen's rising stars and a renewed commitment to excellence, service and responsibility to customers and the environment in which Engen operates.

There are many people who will not be receiving awards here this evening but who deserve to be honoured for their contribution. I encourage them all to persevere in their good work and to continue to strive for the betterment of this company as an important player in the growth of our country's economy.

I thank you for the opportunity to address you, and congratulate you on your achievements.

Thank you