

SPEECH BY KWAZULU-NATAL MEC FOR TRANSPORT, COMMUNITY SAFETY AND LIAISON MR WILLIES MCHUNU DURING THE ROAD SAFETY SUMMIT ORGANISED BY COSATU ON MONDAY, 02 APRIL 2012.

Programme Director;
Provincial Leadership of Cosatu;
Alliance Partners;
Faith-Based Organisations;
Distinguished guests;
Comrades;
Ladies and gentlemen.

Let me take this opportunity to express my sincere appreciation to you comrades for allowing me to join you in this Road Safety Summit and for the platform to share with you some of my views and experiences on the issues of safety on our roads.

It is always encouraging to know that as an ANC-led Government we are not alone. In fact, our Alliance Partners are committed and willing to ensure that together we confront any challenges facing our people, including the question of road carnage.

In fact, I find it very unfortunate indeed that when we have to be talking about ways of moving forward as a province in terms of the government's broader developmental agenda, but we still find ourselves having to come to such gatherings to re-visit the issue of carnage on our roads which continues to draw us back in the province and the country as a whole.

The fact that we are losing an estimated 14 000 people a year to road crashes is a national crisis, particularly because this number includes skilled, professional and talented people who are breadwinners.

They leave orphans and widows and widowers who are often not able to fend for themselves and this strains the government's social welfare system as it has to be extended to people who did not have to depend on it just because someone was careless on the road.

As an important part of our young democratic government, the Transport Department is generally credited as having led the way in matters of road safety and transport over the past years. Nobody would have thought that by this time we would still be losing so many people on our roads.

But, as the political head of the Department of Transport in the province, I am pleased that we have been able to make several important interventions in the light of the increase of road fatalities over the past years.

You will remember that as the province of KwaZulu-Natal, we declared the year 2011 as 'The Year of People's Activism Against Road Carnage and Transgressions'. Now, to further strengthen that the theme for 2012 is, 'The year of Deepening Activism Against Road Accidents'.

We are saying this year we are recommitting ourselves to galvanize communities and deepen our partnerships with relevant stakeholders to support and own our road safety campaign.

Hence, today I am pleased to see our Alliance Partners in the organised labour federation taking a stand on this matter. This is highly commendable indeed. We thank you comrades. We know that you are not doing us a favour as an ANC-aligned government, but you are feeling the pain of seeing your comrades, friends, relatives, family members and neighbours dying or being maimed and put out of work in a sudden, abrupt and shocking manner on our roads.

If as organised labour you stood up and fought until the demise of apartheid, what can stop you now from winning the battle against road carnage that continues to ravage our nation? Of course safety on our roads is everyone's responsibility.

So when we see our Alliance Partners lend a hand in advancing the course of safety on our roads, we know that the journey towards winning this battle has begun in earnest.

As I said earlier, road crashes have a far-reaching impact on victims. People who die or get injured on our roads are normally workers, learners, students and breadwinners. Road accidents upset, disrupt and disorientate the lives of people who are economically active members of society - people who contribute to the growth and development of this country.

Furthermore, due to road accidents, the government spends billions of rands on medical care, compensation for claims as well as social welfare grants. These are the monies which could have been used to deliver services and improve the lives of the citizens of this country through developmental projects.

It would have been much better if we were meeting here to review the impact of such work, but unfortunately for us we are here merely to devise ways of dealing with the carnage on our roads and their devastating effect on our people's livelihood.

In view of this, the KwaZulu-Natal Department of Transport hosted a Road Safety Summit in March last year. The summit was part of our consultation process that allows both the Department and its stakeholders to make informed decisions on how best to tackle factors that compromise the safety of our people on the road.

Some of the resolutions that emerged from the summit were as follows:

- The youth must become champions of driver-behavior;

- Laws and enforcement strategies need to be harsh because perpetrators get light penalties;
- Government needs to lobby for the creation of traffic courts so that road offenders are dealt with amicably;
- The Department must design roads and bridges with safety in mind. For example, necessary signage, markings, speed humps, fencing etc.;
- Intensify road safety education and campaigns around road safety within communities;
- There has to be synergy in the implementation of programs within all tiers of government;
- Monitor the implementation of traffic laws;
- Develop an anti-corruption strategy within the transport industry;
- Regulate and standardize driving and learning centers;
- Come up with a vigorous pedestrian safety strategy.

Subsequent to that, the Transport Department has launched an Integrated Traffic Law Enforcement Committee (ITLEC) as well as engage in continuous research aimed at finding new ways to curb the high levels of road accidents and fatalities. The major role players in this initiative are the Provincial Department of Transport, Ethekewini Metro Police and the various Municipalities in the province.

This committee will soon conclude its investigation into whether we can successfully confiscate vehicles of repeat offenders. They are also working on an innovation involving a device that will prevent, especially public transport vehicles, from exceeding the speed limit. This innovation is being taken to relevant national forums for discussion and your input in this regard will be very important because it affects working people – the public transport owners and their employees.

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.

As a province, we have always maintained that culpable homicide cases must be treated as murder when people die as a result of carelessness, recklessness or the absence of driving skills or the under-preparedness to use the road as a result to fraudulent access to driving licenses.

I am aware that it is not in the interest of organised labour to put employees out of work, and the Alliance is known for vigorous debate and engagement on issues. But as government, we believe that contentious as it may be, it would nevertheless advance the road safety course in general if the suspension or cancellation of driving licences were to become an automatic penalty for offenders.

We are therefore proposing that legislation be amended so that it would not only be at the mercy of the courts that offenders are punished accordingly, but rather that it is an automatic disqualification upon conviction or as soon as the guilty verdict is pronounced.

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. Hence, our appeal to all of you here today is that instead of being too critical of our Government's proposal in the interest of your safety, rather use this summit to come forward with your own proposal and let us see how we can move forward together.

Comrades, the Department of Transport has isolated the driver as our main focus in dealing with road carnage. After all, the driver is the one who controls this big machine called the vehicle and the onus is on the driver – more than pedestrians – to conduct themselves in a manner that promotes as opposed to compromising the safety of passengers and other road users. Hence, we are already working closely with organisers of forums that specialize in promoting the work of heavy vehicles as well as structures that represent driving schools.

Whether through enhanced enforcement or driver education, we are calling upon COSATU to help us impress upon their members to heed the call to safe driving, especially amongst heavy vehicles and public transport drivers and their employers.

I know that some of our comrades here represent workers in the road freight transport industry. We have realised that the developments and opportunities in this sector since the inception of democracy in our country have led to tight competition in the trucking industry.

The heavy vehicle population has increased and companies have increasingly become profit-driven, and this can be seen in their tendency to overload vehicles, neglect vehicle maintenance and promote working conditions that compel drivers to speed on the road and work long hours.

Needless to say, an overworked and tired driver is time-bomb waiting to explode and kill people as well as damage property.

We therefore want to take this opportunity to appeal to our shop-stewards in this industry to play their part in ensuring that they engage employees on the issues of safety on our roads and particularly the safety of the drivers.

To that end, we want to salute the COSATU affiliate, POPCRU KwaZulu-Natal, for partnering with the KZN Departments of Transport, Community Safety and Liaison, in ensuring that road users realise that their lives are at stake and that reckless and irresponsible behaviour on our roads can no longer be tolerated.

Together with POPCRU KwaZulu-Natal, we are rolling out the campaign dubbed 'Operation Val'ingozi'. Operation Val'ingozi seeks to revive our morals and consciences as individuals who contribute to societal safety and well-being or lack of it. Our message is clear: 'Speak to your conscience, don't break the law, don't kill people'.

Following the official launch of Operation Val'ingozi in November last year, we decided to roll out this campaign so that it reaches all our stakeholders as we engage each other in building partnerships, promoting high moral values, respect for the rule of law and educational campaigns on road safety.

This summit is therefore a suitable and proper platform to take forward this campaign – recognising as we do, that we come from different structures. This means that as we will be discussing and sharing ideas, we have to come up with measures that will assist us in taking this initiative forward.

But having said all that, I strongly maintain that the success of such campaigns depends on whether as individuals we are prepared to change our mindset.

Comrades, as organized labour, it is important that each one of us show our commitment to safety by supporting these campaigns which promulgate community safety. Safety on the road begins with you. Let us all agree that today we are forming a partnership that will take us through the Easter Holidays and beyond.

In conclusion, let us unite to show that it cannot be right that KwaZulu-Natal is always the worst province in the country when it comes to spreading the HIV and AIDS pandemic. We cannot be the ones that lead other countries because of high incidents of road carnage, taxi violence and other criminal activities. It cannot be that every year statistics put us on top of the list in the country.

May I take this opportunity and thank in advance all those who will participate in this Summit by submitting their innovations. Hopefully the discussions we are going to have in our commissions will be of high quality with resolutions that can be implemented. Remember, no matter how small you think your idea is, as government we are keen to hear that. Also, do not forget that your ideas are to be crafted into our programmes that can make meaningful contribution to our communities.

I thank you