

# The great

# fuel

Robbers allegedly have inside information

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A CRIME syndicate dressed in police uniforms and allegedly boosted by inside information, is targeting fuel trucks travelling mainly from KwaZulu-Natal. This is costing trucking companies millions of rands in fuel losses.

With the aid of technology, these robbers use jamming devices to throw tracking companies off the track, driving off with their illegally gained cargo.

This year alone, fuel companies have lost fuel valued at millions of rands, said Conrad van der Merwe, regional director of Gauteng's Justicia Investigations, who are investigating this scourge on behalf of affected companies. A 30 000-litre tanker can carry fuel to the value of up to R1 million.

"Members of the syndicate using vehicles with blue lights were allegedly hijacking between 10 to 15 trucks per month since January this year, before this slowed down in the last two months."

Justicia's investigations have revealed that trucks are hijacked on the N3 on their way to Johannesburg, the fuel off-loaded to the syndicate's trucks and resold at unrealistic discounts.

Captain Johannes Ramphora, police spokesperson for the Springs area, said although he did not have full details, the latest hijacking was this month. "It was a syndicate wearing police uniform with a car that was not marked 'Police' but had blue lights."

One person believed to have been a key player in the hijacking was recently arrested on a farm in Springs. It is believed that the hijacked tankers were taken to the farm and the fuel transferred to the syndicate's own tankers for resale.

He said police were also on the trail of a wholesaler who bought the fuel at a whopping 50% discount and sold it to unsuspecting retailers at a discount of between 20 and 25%.

Van der Merwe estimates that the trucking companies have already lost about R350 million.

One company on the KwaZulu-Natal North Coast confirmed that they had two of their fuel trucks hijacked earlier this year. They declined to comment on the matter, saying they needed to consult on what they could reveal in the media.

Van der Merwe said the syndicate operated on the N3 around the Harrismith area and targeted trucks going from Durban to Johannesburg.

He said they had come across numer-

# heist

► **CONRAD VAN DER MERWE**, Regional director of Gauteng's Justicia Investigations

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ous tankers stolen in Durban, emptied and then abandoned.

"As fuel becomes increasingly expensive, the many petrol tankers that are plying the route between Durban and Johannesburg will become increasingly attractive targets. Already, between January and August this year, our investigators came to know of at least 35 different incidents."

The investigators believe the hijackings were an inside job as the hijackers seemed to know what truck was carrying what type of fuel. The time and des-

continuation of the tankers was then allegedly shared with a syndicate in Gauteng.

He said drivers of fuel tankers were hijacked in various ways: Some were flagged down, others were confronted as they finished using toilets at some of the truck stops closer to Johannesburg.

"As the driver climbs into his truck, he would feel a gun in his back and would be forced to climb into the cab and lie on the sleep bunk. He is then tied up and robbed of his cellphone and wallet.

"While doing this, they [robbers] simultaneously use cellphone jammers, a device that jams all the frequencies. Once the frequency is jammed, the tracking company locates the tanker on that particular spot, without knowing that it has been moved."

Vincent Masoga, acting national spokesperson for the South African Transport & Allied Workers' Union (Satawu), said they were aware of the attacks. "There have been a lot of these incidents, which leaves us very concerned about our members' safety.

"We are engaging with the employers to prevent such incidents from happening, because we believe that such information [about trucks] is insider information," he said.

Avhapfani Tshifularo, executive director at the SA Petroleum Industry Association (Sapia), said they were aware of the theft, but had not quantified it. "It is not only on the highways, it is all over the country and it is something that we as the industry are very concerned about."

Drikus Botha, a recovery manager at the Compass Tracking Company, confirmed there had been an increase in the hijacking of fuel trucks.

"It's happening all over the country, this year we have recovered about 26 trucks," he said.

He requested that further questions be e-mailed to him, but had not responded at the time of going to press.

The South African Fuel Retailers Association said they could not comment as their CEO, who comments on such matters, was overseas. Attempts to contact him were unsuccessful.