

## steering column

## Dangerous times

I have always had the world of respect for truck drivers; they generally do a marvellous (if thankless and perilous) job. But now the escalating fuel price means that their jobs are becoming even more dangerous ...

**"S**unny with a chance of murder." That was the *Daily Maverick's* utterly brilliant headline when it reported on 2012/13 crime statistics in South Africa (murders rose by 4,2 percent). Truck hijackings rose too – by 14,9 percent (versus a 5,4 percent increase for cars).

These statistics are, of course, a matter of history. We can weep and wail about them – but we cannot change them. However I fear that truck hijackings could rise even further within the next year. I say this because the already dire situation has now been exacerbated by the rising fuel price: just as this issue of **FOCUS** was about to go to print, we learnt of a massive hijacking scam, which has cost trucking companies up to R350 million. Justicia Investigations revealed this scam, which involves a blue-light syndicate operating between Durban and Gauteng, exclusively to **FOCUS** – and it sounds utterly horrific.

Conrad van der Merwe, regional director Gauteng of Justicia Investigations, says that his company is aware of at least 35 different incidents involving fuel tankers on the N3 between January and July this year.

Most of these incidents took place within 150 km of Johannesburg – and Van der Merwe says that the syndicate committing the crimes was "one of the more sophisticated" that he has ever encountered. "They used white unmarked vehicles with blue lights. After the truck was pulled over, a suspect wearing a South African Police Service uniform took the driver hostage. Then accomplices wearing

placed in the boot of their vehicle," he tells **FOCUS**.

In other cases, drivers of fuel tankers were hijacked after they went to the toilet or shops at a fuel stations close to Johannesburg. "As the driver climbed into his truck, he would feel a gun in his back. He was then tied up and robbed of his cellphone and wallet," Van der Merwe reveals.

The tracking signal of the truck was blocked using an advanced jamming device and the truck was then driven to an off-loading point on a farm in the Springs area. Here, the diesel or petrol was pumped into 30 000-litre containers.

The truck was then driven back to Johannesburg and dumped while the driver was dropped off in the Leandra/Delmas area.

Now I know precisely what readers are thinking: the drivers were involved. Not



Charleen Clarke

sol "Polygraph tests performed during this investigation confirmed that they were not involved in the planning or execution of these hijackings in any way," confirms Van der Merwe.

This particular story ends fairly well. Through the joint efforts of Justicia and a tracking company, the tenant of the farm (who was selling the stolen fuel to a wholesaler) was arrested. So too was the leader of the hijackers, who was out on bail (he is facing charges of hijacking and murder). The wholesaler has also been arrested and the owners of some fuel stations may now be charged.

But I cannot help but wonder how a truck driver feels when he has to transport fuel now. It's like liquid gold – which means that he and his truck are both targets like never before. ■

### JIMS SCOOP!

As you read this column, I will be packing my bags for the Johannesburg International Motor Show (JIMS) – and one of my first stops is going to be the Mercedes-Benz SA Commercial Vehicles stand. As we were preparing to send this magazine to the printer, I had an exclusive pre-JIMS interview with Kobus van Zyl, the company's vice president for commercial vehicles, and he revealed that the stand would boast a vehicle "that will draw more people than any passenger car on the show". "It is spectacular: people will stand

four or five deep to look at this vehicle," he promised. I'm intrigued ...

Van Zyl also revealed exclusively to **FOCUS** that the customer hospitality area would be devoted to Western Star. "This is a small but hugely passionate brand. The area will have an American theme and it will boast a stunning, unique truck," he said. I will reveal more details about the Mercedes-Benz stand in our online newsletter – so be sure to look out for it.

Sounds like loads of fun – I'll see you there