

Fuel Truck Hijack Syndicate Arrested



Conrad van der Merwe, Regional Director Gauteng of Justicia Investigations, says that trucking companies have lost up to R350 million in stolen fuel to a blue light syndicate operating between Durban and Gauteng,

"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 July this year, our investigators came to know of at least 35 different incidents. However, there have probably been more, given that between 40 and 50 fuel tankers are on the highway on any single day," he says.

At present, Gauteng consumes 65% of the fuel in the country. The bulk of this is either imported or refined by Engen or Sapref, two of the country's largest oil refineries. Most is transported by road. Unfortunately, van der Merwe says, the multi billion Rand New Multi Product Pipeline, which is still under construction by Transnet and would be the safest means of transporting petrol and diesel, is not yet fully operational.

Although Justicia investigates a wide variety of different crimes and has come across tankers stolen in Durban, emptied and abandoned, he says that the blue light syndicate that investigators exposed operating along the N3 in August was one of the more sophisticated. Most of these tanker hijackings took place within 150 kilometres of Johannesburg. Vehicles were carrying petrol, diesel and paraffin.

According to van der Merwe, the syndicate used white unmarked vehicles with blue lights. After a truck was pulled over and a suspect wearing an SAPS uniform overpowered or took the driver hostage, accomplices wearing plain clothes appeared. They used cable ties to tie up the driver. He was placed in the boot of their vehicle.

In other cases, drivers of fuel tankers were high jacked after they went to the toilet or shops at some of the ultra cities close to Johannesburg. "As the driver climbed 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 was then tied up and robbed of his cell phone and wallet," said van der Merwe.

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

The truck and trailer was then driven back to Johannesburg and dumped while the driver was dropped off in a rural area in the Leandra/ Delmas area where he would be left to struggle for an hour or two before making his way to the nearest police station to report the incident.

He added that horses and empty trailers were eventually discovered a few days after an incident at different locations in Johannesburg. He said that owners of the ensembles, of which the horse alone was worth around R1,5 million, were fortunate to recover their vehicles.

"In all cases, the drivers were robbed of their cell phones and wallets. Polygraph tests performed during this thorough investigation confirmed that they were not involved in the planning or execution of these high jacks in any way," continues van der Merwe.

Justicia, assisted by the tracking company responsible for five trucks owned by a small trucking company, was able to locate the farm that was used to store the stolen petrol and diesel. Seals found on the premises indicated that numerous loads of stolen petrol and diesel were off loaded on this farm. The tenant, who was responsible for on selling the stolen fuel to a wholesaler, was arrested.

Further investigations lead to the arrest of the leader of the high jacking team. It was found that that he was out on bail on numerous charges of high jacking and even murder. He was positively identified by drivers during identification parades and has been charged with numerous fuel truck high jacks in Gauteng.

In addition, Justicia was able to identify the fuel wholesaler who purchased most of the stolen fuel from the suspect on the farm and then sold this stolen fuel to apparently unsuspecting service stations. Van der Merwe said that the fuel was sold by the farm operator to the wholesaler at a 50 percent discount. The wholesaler is believed to have added a substantial mark up before disposing of the fuel to a number petrol garages at a 20 to 25 percent discount.

He said that, as yet, it was not clear how many filling stations were involved. However, investigations are ongoing and he expects further arrests.

Van der Merwe said that cases had been postponed with the next appearance scheduled for the beginning of October in Johannesburg.

"Since these arrests have been made, fuel truck high jackings on the N3 have come to a complete standstill. Justicia and its investigators will do their best to ensure that the suspects are found guilty and receive lengthy sentences," he concluded.