

Of road safety rules and heavy vehicles

Accountability of operators is the missing link

ROAD safety experts are right. There is no point having stricter rules without consistent and transparent enforcement, both of which, admittedly, aren't our strong points. It is almost always heavy vehicle drivers who are taken to court, but not the operators. The authorities know vehicle safety is the responsibility of the owners, not drivers. The recent tragedy in Teluk Intan, Perak, where nine Federal Reserve Unit (FRU) personnel were killed in a collision between a gravel-laden lorry and an FRU truck is a case in point. There, the authorities again appeared to have focused on the driver. Conspicuously missing was the lorry owner. No reason given. Do not get us wrong. We aren't saying that drivers shouldn't be charged. Almost always, the immediate cause of road tragedies are reckless drivers. The gravel-laden lorry was reported to have had a faulty steering, yet the owner was not charged. The authorities should be transparent about the investigation so that the people know the facts. If severe sanctions such as suspension of licence or vehicle impoundment are not imposed on errant operators of heavy vehicles as recommended by road safety experts, tragedies such as that in Teluk Intan will keep happening.

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to meet tight delivery deadlines, operate poorly maintained vehicles or skip breaks." He is right. Companies must be held accountable for their hiring practices, safety training and vehicle maintenance. Sadly, our enforcement is mostly reactive, meaning it kicks in with all the might after tragedies strike, when the focus should be on preventing them. To Law, such a reactive approach weakens deterrence. He is right again. After every serious tragedy, the Road Transport Department vows to tighten enforcement on the roadworthiness of heavy vehicles. To errant heavy vehicle operators, they are mere vows.

Enforcement agencies must conduct a nationwide audit on the roadworthiness of heavy vehicles, including those owned by fleet operators and logistics firms. Not occasionally, but persistently. Many lives are being lost in collisions involving heavy vehicles. According to media reports, 1,400 people were killed in collisions involving heavy vehicles between 2018 and 2023. In the first 10 months of last year, 5,634 lives were lost in collisions involving 825 lorries. Yes, strict road safety rules are needed, but they are as good as not having them if they are not enforced. Enforcement agencies have long complained of lack of manpower. They are not wrong. There are more vehicles on the road than there are humans in the country. A 2021 estimate published in this newspaper said there were 33.3 million vehicles on the road compared with Malaysia's population of 32.6 million. Of this, 1.5 million were goods vehicles. The government will do well to equip enforcement agencies with people and technology needed to conduct robust enforcement.

This must change. One such change is to address systemic issues by placing greater responsibility on companies that operate heavy vehicles as highlighted to this newspaper on Monday by Associate Professor Dr Law Teik Hua, head of the Road Safety Research Centre at Universiti Putra Malaysia. "Employers often take shortcuts, which often put pressure on drivers