

Volvo tightening truck safety

Regional collaborations focus on gathering data to raise awareness and reducing human error

BY DINESH APPAVU

THE damning truth from a recently conducted Volvo Truck study puts the spotlight on human error as the determining cause in nine out of 10 truck accidents in Europe.

Even with its modern infrastructure and established trucking network, such an alarming number in Europe raises the question of the severity of the issue in other regions around the world.

Volvo Trucks Malaysia (Volvo) is now spearheading efforts with a number of collaborations and projects in Malaysia that aims to address the safety concerns regarding truck



safety. To better understand the initiative, Volvo arranged some time with us and Dr Karsten Heinig (picture), manager of the Volvo Trucks Accident Research Team (Advanced Technology and Research).

Heinig's visit to Malaysia is part of the collaboration between Volvo Sweden and Volvo Trucks Malaysia. He sits on the scientific board of the iSTREC (Innovative Solutions to Reduce Crashes Between Trucks and Motorcycles) project that is a collaborative effort among Volvo

Trucks Malaysia, Agensi Inovasi Malaysia, the Road Safety Research Center of Universiti Putra Malaysia, Malaysian Institute of Road Safety and Sweden's Vehicle and Traffic



Safety Centre.

In Malaysia, 50 per cent of accidents involve trucks and motorcycles. About 20 per cent of the 4,036 motorcycle deaths in the country in 2010 were the result of truck and motorcycle crashes.

One reason Volvo Sweden came to Malaysia for the project is due to the sheer volume of motorcycles plying the roads here. The number of motorcycle users in Asia far outnumbers those in Europe, meaning less data for the Volvo Trucks accident research team.

"We focus on finding simple solutions to the problems. For example, one of the solutions we came up with was to put up signs on the truck to alert motorcyclists that they were in the truck's blindspot. These signs can only be seen when the motorcyclist is in the blindspot," said Heinig.

With the focus on reducing human error or the possibility of human error, Volvo Truck Malaysia conducts driver-training courses. All new Volvo trucks sold in Malaysia are packaged with a driver training course.

One of the biggest, if not the biggest, contributing factor to driver comfort is rest, and that is something that the Europeans have well regulated. Airtight regulations in Europe restrict a truck driver to no more than 10 hours of driving a day and not more than 50 hours a week.

Following 50 hours of driving a week, a 48-hour continuous break is mandated for the driver. Furthermore, the driver cannot drive for more than 4.5 hours at a stretch. Although

similar regulations are in place in Malaysia, enforcement is somewhat lax.

With sufficient focus on improving the human error part of the equation, Volvo Trucks is not forgetting the mechanical side of it as well. Building on the effort to protect the external party in the event of a collision, Volvo works on passive safety of the truck such as activating the safety features of the other vehicle involved in the crash.

For instance, the front bar of the truck is designed to be at the same height as a car's bumper so that the compression zone of the car will absorb as much of the impact as possible.

Heinig said another human error is the lack of proper maintenance. "Fleet operators tend to try and cut costs by skimping on maintenance that could lead to dangerous situations such as brake failure."

The Truck Accident Research Team conducts a lot of testing every year to get accurate data on safety improvements.

"We crash test around 120 trucks every year as part of the team's research. This gives you a fair indication of the lengths we go to for safety."