

Boksburg Tank Explosion Calls Railway Collapse into Question

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A lot of scandals take place in South Africa. It happens so often that people who learn about scandal after scandal are no longer alarmed, instead trivial discourse around issues of weight dominates the serious discussion. Despite this prevailing desensitisation, the tragic explosion of a gas tanker in Boksburg Benoni (Tambo Memorial) Hospital just outside the BBH Hospital on 24 December 2022 has sent reverberating shock waves across the country. A lot of people are at a loss to explain the accident, but many others have pointed the finger at one cause or another.

Some people have highlighted the fact that in logistics, for a route plan to be done properly, it takes days and that a compliance manager with knowledge of all bridges - which means their locations, their heights and what routes to take to avoid all of them and still reach the destination – must be involved. This means, as long as the driver, who has since disappeared, did not reroute the dangerous goods tanker, the finger points at people in logistics management at the company, said to be Infinite Transport & Logistics. These are people who must face charges of culpable homicide alongside the driver who squeezed the gas tanker through the bridge in Boksburg. Firing them will not be enough.

The blame has been variously allocated to the driver of the gas tanker, the logistics manager of the company; the driver's knowledge of road signs has been questioned which brings into the spotlight the public secret of the way many people in South Africa acquire driving licenses. Bribery in the licence department is a well-known and deeply embedded practice. For many people, it is difficult to imagine a candidate passing a driving test without paying some form of a bribe, something which has opened the way for people who are not fit to drive to pay their way into being licenced to drive vehicles.

Perhaps the less talked about source of the rising problem of big trucks on our roads, involved in many accidents, is the disappearance of rail infrastructure and therefore the apparent shift in the transportation of goods from rail to roads. The hazards of transporting dangerous loads such as highly flammable gases and chemicals, or abnormally heavy loads, have been laid bare for all of us to see in the Boksburg explosion.

The blanket cancelation of security contracts, including ones which should not have been under review for being irregularly awarded, should be investigated. Following the express cancelation of security contracts at the Passenger Rail Agency of South Africa (Prasa) under then CEO, Nkosinathi Sishi – ironically, after complaints about cable theft and crime under the watch of private security companies who were contracted – the picking apart of rail infrastructure which led to the near-total destruction of rail networks countrywide, started. Hooligans, some linked to Lesotho gang and music group, Treine, stripped the rail infrastructure, particularly during the national state of disaster declared by President Cyril Ramaphosa in March 2020, especially around major cities. Cable theft and even the stripping of rail bars and the destruction of once-classy colourful train stations such as that in Doornfontein, was

left to carry on unhindered. Two years later, the country is with a severely shrunken rail network. By now, the transportation of goods has shifted from goods trains to the trucking industry. Trucks run up and down the country in the national roads. This rise in the transportation of goods mainly by road has not gone without problems. There has been a number of road accidents involving trucks.

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