

SADC works to enhance railway security

By Charity Moonga

RAILWAY transport is one of the oldest means of transportation in the world, especially for Zambia. As a landlocked country, inter-railway transport is a source of wealth for Zambia through prospective investment.

Apart from being good transport for passengers, railway transport has also been reliable transport for goods and cargo and can be a solution for the economic advancement of Zambia and the southern African region as a whole.

However, despite having been reliable transport for so long, railway transport has been affected by a rise in criminal acts such as stealing goods and cargo for customers.

All types of goods and cargo, including minerals, have been stolen while in transit on railway transport. There has been a challenge to ensure that all cargo passing through railway lines and ports are safe and secure to uphold customer satisfaction.

At a recent 35th SADC Security Consultative committee stakeholders' conference held at Livingstone's Fairmount Hotel, participants expressed concern at the continued rise in cases of theft of goods and cargo in transit.

Railway Systems of Zambia (RSZ) deputy general manager Charles Phiri says his organisation is concerned about the rise in criminal acts of stealing goods and cargo for customers, while in transit. The conference attracted about 30 participants from SADC member states, all of them with a concern of how goods and services could be protected throughout the corridor.

The participants said it was important to review and map out new strategies to counter goods and cargo thefts.

Mr Phiri said it was important to enhance security and educate people in the countries involved on the importance of safeguarding other people's goods and cargo.

He said enhanced security of the region's infrastructure and assets was a catalyst to the social and economic development of the region.

RSZ has since embarked on a strategy to outsmart criminal plans and ensure that goods and cargo for customers are protected throughout the corridor.

He said it was important for the company to address crime within a long-term development plan if it was to effectively contribute to the national social and economic development.

"We need security services to ensure protection and safety of citizens, employees and clients' property," Mr Phiri said.

He commended the Zambia Police Service for the support it had continued to render to RSZ in terms of improving security.

He said improving security would promote inter-regional competition in terms of efficient delivery of goods and services within the region.

"Whatever it takes, security, peace and profitability must be maintained in the railways and seaports for the success and development of the Southern African region," he said.

He said enhancing security services in railway transport will in turn ensure the protection and safety of citizens, employees and clients' property.

Mr Phiri calls for a set of continuous strategic responsive actions over the long term to ensure that clients and customers are motivated to remain loyal to the transport companies.

In this vein the Zambia Police Service has played a major role in maintaining security for railway transport to ensure that the country achieves maximum benefits from the railway system.

So far, the Zambia Police has upgraded the standard of its security personnel through the training of 61 men and women in law, police duties and weapon handling within two years.

The police service also approved and acquired 55 firearms.

Apart from that, Zambia police officers have also been placed on attachment, especially on the Copperbelt to escort copper products on trains to ensure that cargo and goods are safeguarded. Apart from the problems of pilfering of goods and cargo, railway transport in Zambia has been faced with problems of vandalism.

RSZ bemoans the continuous high levels of vandalism of its infrastructure in the railway transport industry.

Mr Phiri said it was sad that vandalism cost RSZ billions of Kwacha per year despite all the commendable mitigation efforts by stakeholders to curb the vice.

He called for intensified efforts to enhance security and educate Zambians on the importance of safeguarding infrastructure as opposed to damaging it.

The police service has been conducting patrols on the railway line to protect the infrastructure.

To further improve security, stakeholders called for modern information technology to enable tracking of trains to monitor the status of wagons from the point of loading to the final destination (the point of offloading).

Modern information technology would assist customers follow their consignment in real time, ascertain their current allocation along the corridor and know when their cargo arrives at the final destination.

All wagons on each train would be listed on one document for easy tracking.

The stakeholders called for the monitoring of security of goods and cargo in transit so that if any accidentally dropped, it could easily be located.

"There is also need for communication between countries on movement of cargo as well as an emphasis on the usage of global positioning system," he said.

Inspector General of Police Francis Kabonde says Zambia attaches importance to the growing infrastructure such as the railway lines which are beneficial to national development.

He says the Zambian police will continue working with RSZ and mining companies to curb crime in the inter-railway sector.

"The challenges are many as far as theft of mineral products is concerned. As police, we have intensified our fight to stop these illegal activities by ensuring that both the supplier and buyer of stolen mineral products face the wrath of the law," Mr Kabonde says.

The police was sensitising fake investors on the dangers of buying stolen mineral products.

"We have also seconded prosecutors to the mines as well as conducting joint security operations with railway and mining companies so that our investors' investments are well protected and they operate in a peaceful environment for the benefit of our country," Mr Kabonde says.

The stakeholders at the conference further called for unity among security agencies from all the countries in order to disrupt and engage criminality.

Intelligence led policing initiatives should be developed in conjunction with local communities and provide reassurance to the public. This can be done through motorised and foot patrols.

Regional countries have also been called on to share information on known criminals who terrorise the trains and buyers.

Some stakeholders called for screening of employees and keeping constant surveillance on them while on duty, especially when trains are in transit.

It is also important to come up with key accounting officials who would be responsible for the service to the customers.

The key accounting official/manager will follow the customers' cargo and assets along the corridor from point of departure regardless of the countries, railway companies and hand-over points.

"The accounting official will make sure that wherever the cargo is, whether in DRC, Zambia, Tanzania, Botswana, Swaziland or South Africa, that cargo is secured, using the designated security procedures," the stakeholders said.

With the implementation of the above strategies that were suggested at the 35th security consultative committee conference, there is hope that inter-regional competition in terms of efficient delivery of services and goods in the region will be promoted.

Whatever it takes, security, peace and profitability must be maintained in the railways for the success and development of the Southern African region.