

THE POST

Tuesday September 30, 2008

The call for toll gates

Last week we woke up to news that rail operators in the country were urging government to urgently introduce road toll gates in order to even the playing field in the transport sector.

In a joint statement, Rail Systems of Zambia (RSZ) and the Tanzania Zambia Rail Authority (TAZARA) posited that they were, through fuel levy, contributing a huge chunk of money to road maintenance which they did not use, at the expense of maintaining rail infrastructure.

The purpose of this column is not to discuss the railway operator's fuel levy concerns, as this levy is charged as a tax without exemption, but to highlight some progress towards the introduction of a tolling system for selected roads and bridges in Zambia.

Following the recommendation by Allan Kennaird and SWEROAD/Africon, a study which was commissioned by the National Road Fund Agency, it was decided that study tours of a number of countries that have been operating a road tolling system be undertaken in order to learn more about road tolling prior to commencement of the system in Zambia.

Study tours to Mozambique, South Africa and Lesotho have since been conducted to learn how key players were operating the tolling systems; appreciate the type of legislation, institutional arrangements for the actual collection of toll fees and how these fees are channeled to the Road Fund.

The type of toll gates in these countries range from manually operated to sophisticated and computerized toll gates with integrated security and management systems.

For example, the Road Fund legislation was enacted in 2003 in Mozambique and the country's road tolling is through a 30 year concession agreement with Trans Africa Concessions Limited.

The collection of toll fees is outsourced to a private company that is compensated through a commission. Road maintenance is among other revenues, based on the user pay principle where road users pay for the use of the road and the revenue received from tolls is dedicated to improving the tolled road or bridge.

With South Africa, the main reason for road tolling is that the toll fees should provide funding through a self financing model for the maintenance of the tolled roads thereby reducing dependence on the national budget.

A national wide feasibility study was undertaken in that country as the first steps in the implementation of road tolling. A total of 25 per cent of the road network can be tolled and already 60 per cent of the tolled network has been reached.

As for Lesotho, the Finance Road Fund Regulations of 2005 established the Road Fund. Receipts into the Road Fund include toll gate fees. The Toll Gates Act No. 2 of 1976 provides for the erection of toll gates and lists as an offence if a vehicle was to pass through the toll gate without paying. Toll gates in Lesotho are administered and operated by the Road Fund.

With the above experiences, the NRFA will consider a feasibility study with stakeholder broad based input on tolling of certain roads and bridges to systematically move away from over dependence on fuel levy for road maintenance.

Like in the countries visited, the tolling system in Zambia could be done through a Public Private Partnership (PPP) framework based on a concession..

Road users and all stakeholders are expected to buy in the concept of user pay principle which is the basis for the PPP in road tolling.