

Workers on lorries get more protection

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By Teh Joo Lin

Safety rules tightened and will be phased in over a three-year period

ACTION is finally being taken to ensure that foreign workers are ferried more safely to and from their workplaces.

Rails along the backs of lorries will have to go higher so that there is less chance of a worker being flung out in an accident. The decks will also have to be fitted with canopies as a safety measure and to shield them from rain.

The Government wants all lorries which double as worker transport to have these features installed in three years. They should also provide more seating space, which effectively halves the number of workers each vehicle can carry.

In the meantime, stop-gap measures will kick in from next month: No part of the worker can be more than 1.1m higher than the cargo deck when he is seated. Among other things, the penalties for breaches will also be increased and enforcement intensified.

The changes, announced in Parliament yesterday by Senior Parliamentary Secretary for Transport Teo Ser Luck, come more than 16 months after a workgroup was set up to look at the safe ferrying of workers.

A total of 210 passengers on the cargo decks of lorries were injured or killed last year, up from 69 in 2005. There have been public calls for a ban on using lorries to ferry foreign workers or to have seat belts installed on their decks.

Mr Teo told Parliament that the injury and fatality rates of those ferried on the backs of lorries were low - about six times lower than that of all vehicles. The workgroup found that the existing measures - such as a speed limit of 60kmh - were generally effective.

'Specifically, the evidence from the accident figures does not suggest that a drastic change to the policy is warranted,' he told the House, adding that the recommendations were put up to 'further enhance' the safety of workers.

The changes were a relief to those in industries such as construction and logistics, who had feared an outright ban or the introduction of new safety measures that would add to their cost.

Mr Simon Lee of the Singapore Contractors' Association yesterday praised the practicality of the measures.

'We think it is reasonable and we are supportive. To go for a total ban, I don't think our public transport system is ready to have about 200,000 workers - or part of that number - use public transport.'

Mr Steven Soo, a vehicle retrofitter, estimated that it will cost about \$1,800 for a 10-foot-long lorry to be installed with the higher railings and a metal hood.

Unlike the retrofitting of mini buses that ferry school children which are partly subsidised by the state, lorry owners will have to pay their own way.

Mr John Gee, president of Transient Workers Count Too and a vocal critic of the current practice of ferrying workers, said the new measures were 'a step forward'. But transporting workers in buses should still be the ultimate goal, he said.

'If a lorry overturns, even with higher sides, the results are likely to be pretty well as serious as they are now. There's added protection but there's still quite some way to go,' he said.

Dr Joseph Thambiah, head of National University Hospital's orthopaedic trauma division, said the absence of restraints or seat belts means that those sitting on the cargo deck could still injure themselves if they were flung against each other or thrown to the back of the lorry.

President of the National Safety Council Tan Jin Thong welcomed the tightened rules, but thinks a 'safety mindset' among workers, drivers and employers is key to reducing the casualty count.

'Once we have that, the accident rate will automatically be reduced,' he said.

When contacted, Jurong GRC MP Halimah Yacob, who had asked for an update of the workgroup's report in Parliament, said she was glad there was 'some progress' on the issue, but wondered if the three-year time frame - designed so businesses could phase in the changes - was too long. 'The other challenge would be enforcement. It'll be a big challenge - there are thousands of lorries all over Singapore, thousands of work sites. How do you ensure compliance?'