

Two truck drivers killed as European and Asian fuel protests spread

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13 June 2008

Two truck drivers, one in Spain and the other in Portugal, have been killed during protests against fuel price increases that have rocked Europe as well as Asia.

The disputes involving fishermen and farmers, as well as truckers, have become increasingly bitter.

Self-employed truck driver Julio Cervilla Soto was killed outside the Merca Granada wholesale market in Granada, when a van he was trying to stop ran over him. A Portuguese trucker died when trying to stop a lorry in the town of Alcanena, north of the capital Lisbon.

The strike is being waged by self-employed truck drivers, who make up an estimated 20 percent of Spain's 380,000-strong total. They say that the larger companies are better placed to offset the 36 percent fuel price increase over the last year by lowering their charges.

Juan Antonio, who owns two trucks, told *El Pais*, "I get 85 cents per kilometre. Of that, around 50 cents goes on diesel. On top of that, we have to pay social security, the driver and maintenance. Just changing the tyres, something that has to be done once a year, costs 6,000 euros."

Alberto added, "You want me to tell you how the price of diesel affects me? I went to pay for my breakfast this morning, but my bank account was empty. That's how it affects me. It makes no difference to me to be stuck here, because I wouldn't be earning much more if I was working."

Socialist Party Prime Minister José Luis Rodríguez Zapatero has offered the truckers emergency loans and an early retirement package, but refuses to guarantee the minimum tariff they demand, saying that it would be illegal under European Union competition legislation.

Minister for the Interior Alfredo Pérez Rubalcaba said more than 50 people had been arrested since the beginning of the strike and that the government had mobilised more than 25,000 police to break up blockades and escort lorries and would act with "maximum force and maximum firmness."

"The security forces will act resolutely to keep roads clear and ensure that basic products are distributed," Rubalcaba added.

Since the strike began, supplies of fresh meat, fish and fruit to Madrid have come to a halt and panic buying has left hundreds of petrol stations empty in the capital, Barcelona, and other major cities. Auto manufacturers have had to cut production, hit by their reliance on "just-in-time" supply chains; ferry companies have cancelled many sailings to the Balearic Islands and Palma; and more than half of the construction sites in Málaga province are reported to be at a standstill.

The government has called in riot police to break up the protests in the cities and open up the border crossings. Foreign lorry drivers at the La Jonquera frontier with France claimed that they have been held hostage there for two days without food or water. At the Irún border crossing, Basque police arrested two pickets, accusing them of threatening the driver of a van with a screwdriver.

Some 21 people were injured in Almería, 13 of them policemen, during a battle outside the city council offices involving at least 2,500 farmers demanding a reduction in the tax charged on diesel. In Seville, nearly 30

people were injured, including 8 policemen in fights outside the Andalusian parliament where there were 7 arrests.

In Alicante, a 43-year-old non-striking driver whose truck was set on fire whilst he was sleeping in it on an industrial estate in San Isidro suffered second-degree burns to a quarter of his body. Lorries were also set on fire in Murcia in south and in Arazuri in the north.

On Wednesday, protesting fishermen burned tyres in the northwestern Pontevedra region, temporarily blocking a bridge to Portugal, and others trying to enter the Galician regional parliament fought with police in Santiago de Compostela.

In Portugal, latest reports suggest lorry drivers who have been on strike since Monday have now ended their action and accepted a package of measures negotiated with the government. As in Spain, shops began to run out of fresh food and long queues built up at petrol stations. The main airport in Lisbon ran out of aviation fuel, and fishermen blockaded the Guadiana Bridge that links the south of the country with Spain.

From June 1 to June 3, there was a nation-wide boycott of BP, Galp and Repsol garages in protest against the record profits they have just announced.

Prime Minister José Socrates has refused to take any action against rising prices and simply called for installation of motorway signs displaying petrol prices at various service stations and the creation of a fuel price web site. He added that people should wait until the minimum wage is increased in 2009.

Elsewhere in Europe, thousands of truckers across Poland stopped work on Wednesday to protest rising costs. The regional protest coordinator in southern Silesia, Rajmund Nierychło, said, "The protest involved not only trucks, but also vans, buses, taxis as well as urban transport in general. All road vehicles."

Besides rising fuel prices, the truckers are also complaining about the high cost of toll fees on motorways contracted out to private companies, the long time it takes to cross the border into the countries to the east of the European Union, and the competition from these countries, which receive much cheaper fuel from Russia.

Fuel market expert Andrzej Szczesniak explained, "Regarding the prices of fuel and taxes, one shouldn't compare us to the rest of Europe, but rather to our eastern neighbours. Polish drivers, I mean big trucks and commercial transport, are competing mostly with very cheap fuel and a cheap workforce from the east. And if you compare Polish prices of diesel with Belarus, Ukraine or Russia, we are absolutely non-competitive. The second thing is that compared to other countries of the so-called New Europe, we are not in a good position because our [Polish] taxes are the highest. And the third problem is that VAT at 22 percent—the tax which is very high in Poland—is not deductible (from running costs)."

In Scotland, farmers, fishermen and truckers are meeting to discuss possible further action following a protest outside the Scottish parliament in Edinburgh earlier this week. David McCutcheon, managing director of haulage company Bullet Express and leader of the protest, said, "There is

anger and frustration, and things will start getting out of hand when firms start going out of business”

“People are prepared to take militant action. The Spanish are blocking roads and it will come to that here eventually. This country is heading for meltdown and a general strike.

“This is not just a bunch of truck-drivers looking after their own ends. We’re out to fight the cost of fuel, which is affecting the whole economy.”

A protest is planned in London next month, by which time hundreds of tanker drivers working for haulage firms employed by Shell may have gone on strike in protest at their pay being worth no more now than in 1992, despite working 11 hours more each week.

Dutch lorry drivers also took part in a go-slow protest on Thursday.

In India, a one-day strike called by the Kashmir Traders and Manufacturers Federation to protest against the previous week’s 10 percent fuel price rise shut shops and banks in the state of Jammu-Kashmir. “We express utter dismay over the rise of essential commodities, petrol, diesel and cooking gas, and urge people to observe a complete strike on June 11,” the group said in a statement.

The action coincided with the third day of a strike called by the state’s transport operators demanding an increase in fares and freight charges. Kashmir Motor Drivers Association President Ghulam Muhammad Bhat said, “Transport fares have not been revised here since 2005 while oil prices have increased manifold during this period. This has put us under tremendous pressure as we are incurring continuous losses.”

“We had informed the government about the price rise of so many automobile spare parts, but they did not respond to our repeated calls. And the recent unprecedented hike in petrol and diesel forced us to go on a strike to press for our demands,” Bhat added.

During the strike, protesters hurled stones at the car of a top elected state official, Manzoor Ahmed, and paramilitary soldiers fired tear gas and used batons to prevent them marching to Srinagar, the state’s summer capital. At least two dozen employees were detained after hundreds of government employees affiliated to the Employees Joint Action Committee and many lawyers protested outside the Civil Secretariat.

In Malaysia, the largest oil producer in Asia, opposition groups are planning mass protests against a 41 percent rise in fuel prices last week to 2.70 ringgit (US\$0.87) a litre (US\$3.30 a gallon). Prime Minister Abdullah Ahmad Badawi tried to defuse opposition saying, “The government feels that the people are still trying to adjust to the high oil price situation” and promised that there would be no further increase in prices this year.

Shamsul Iskandar Akin, a leader of the GERAMM youth coalition against oil price rises, rejected Abdullah’s pledge and said the increase had led prices to rise in food and transport and caused further hardship for the poor. A march is planned today to the Petronas Twin Towers in Kuala Lumpur, where the state monopoly Petronas is headquartered. Police warned that no permit had been issued for a demonstration and people would be arrested.

In Nepal, violent protests erupted across the country on Tuesday after the Nepal Oil Corporation (NOC) increased fuel prices by about 25 percent following the price rise in India, from where it is supplied. The situation was exacerbated by India, which is Nepal’s sole fuel supplier, cutting its exports to the country by 80 percent in recent week as a result of non-payment by the near-bankrupt NOC. Purushottam Ojha, NOC chairman, used the crisis to announce that private companies would now be allowed to import fuel “from any part of the world,” ending India’s monopoly. Petrol increases to 100 Nepali rupees (US\$1.5) per litre against the old price of Rs.80 and diesel Rs.70 instead of Rs.56.

The Federation of Nepal National Transport Entrepreneurs issued a statement saying long-distance bus fares were increasing by 30 percent and short-distance bus and taxi fares by 35 percent.

Students burnt tyres, blocking roads in the capital and shutting down the East-West highway, the most important route for supplies from India. Demonstrations were reported from other areas in the country.

Similar protests took place last October. On at least two other occasions in recent months, the government tried to increase prices, but huge protests forced it to back down. The last attempt by the government of Girija Prasad Koirala to do the same on the eve of last April’s election contributed to the defeat of his Nepali Congress Party.

In South Korea, many ports are at a standstill, blockaded by truckers who have voted to strike on Monday in protest at rising fuel costs. They are demanding lower fuel prices, increased fees for hauling freight and a standardised pricing system that will ensure a minimum wage. A strike at the country’s largest port, Busan, which handles three quarters of exports, is holding up nearly 90 percent of container traffic.

In Thailand, thousands of truck drivers have gone on strike to protest the government’s failure to address recent fuel price increases. Tongyu Kongkongkhan, secretary-general of Land Transportation Association of Thailand, claimed that after about 120,000 trucks had stopped working in several provinces on Wednesday, “We merely showed our power by parking the trucks on the roads, but if the government fails to meet our demand, the federation has decided to make June 17 D-day, when we will bring at least 100,000 trucks into Bangkok.” The federation is demanding that the government sell diesel to them for 3 baht (9 US cents) per litre less than the market price and subsidise the conversion of truck engines to cheaper natural gas.

The fuel crisis has also hit fishermen and farmers, with Fishing Federation of Thailand President Mana Sripitak saying more than half of his members’ 50,000 fishing boats are docked because of the high cost of diesel. Some have been burned in protest.

In Hong Kong this week, hundreds of lorry drivers marched to government headquarters demanding a meeting with Chief Executive Donald Tsang Yam-Kuen. Police smashed the windows of their trucks and towed them away after they brought the Central district to a standstill. An organiser said the transport sector was being crippled by fuel prices that have soared from HK\$9.37 per litre to HK\$11.61 between December and May.

“Most of those in the industry are being forced to close their businesses and some are [having to] sell their containers, trailers and tractors,” said Tang Chi-Keung of the Public Omnibus Operators’ Association. Thomas Tam, chairman of the Hong Kong Waste Disposal Industry Association, said some of his association’s members are considering going on strike today for the first time in 12 years.



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