

Speed and Corruption, a Fatal Mix

*By Andualem Sisay**

October 8, 2010, was an unlucky day for Haile Getachew, 27. He was driving and carrying a forged driver's license when he was pulled over by a traffic official. Drivers like Getachew frequently offer bribes to officials to avoid time in court or traffic offices, and traffic officials frequently accept them.

But the officer that pulled Getachew over happened to be new to the force and, contrary to expectation, was unwilling to take a bribe. Getachew and his car ended up at the police department for days.

For the past five years, Getachew had been driving around Addis Ababa using his forged driver's license with no problems – even when he violated traffic rules. It is common knowledge that most traffic officers will take bribes, ranging from 20 to 100 birr (US\$1.20 to US\$6).

Acquiring these bogus credentials is easy enough. Getachew sent photographs and 500 birr (US\$30) to a friend who lives in Gimma City and, in exchange, received a forged license with a city transport authority seal.

After his arrest, Getachew appeared in court and was released for 600 birr (US\$36). "I also had to pay 500 birr (US\$30) under the table to a detective participating in my case," he said. In addition, his brother made another payment so the detective would change information in Getachew's documents so the court would expedite the bail agreement.

Endemic Corruption

Unfortunately, corruption in Ethiopia is not limited to its roads and traffic authorities. Over time, it has become increasingly prevalent in most public institutions.

According to "Fighting Corruption and Safeguarding Integrity," a paper published in 2007 by Tesfaye Shamebo Megiso, many government institutions in Ethiopia are vulnerable to serious levels of systemic corruption.

This includes allocation of land and government housing, telephone and electric services, access to loans, licensing and issuance of permits, procurement of consumables, and fixed assets provided by public services in Ethiopia. Tesfaye said customs and excise-tax offices also are believed to be highly affected by ingrained corrupt practices.

In 2008, the Transparency International Corruption Perceptions Index ranked Ethiopia at No. 126 out of 179 countries, reporting: “Despite legal restrictions, officials have been accused of manipulating the privatization process, and state-owned and party-owned businesses receive preferential access to land leases and credit.”

The facts are clear: Ethiopia has a corruption problem that covers many bases. And while just one aspect of a greater issue, the fraud and vice within the Ethiopian motor vehicle regulation system provides a descriptive example of how unorganized administration, lax oversight and corrupt bureaucrats can create a problem that results in thousands of accidents and hundreds of deaths a year.

Ethiopian Traffic: Unsafe at Any Speed

From 2004 to 2008, about 85,000 traffic accidents were recorded in Ethiopia. Over 2,800 people died and 8,696 suffered permanent injuries. Since 2009, over 2,000 people were killed and 8,000 injured each year in over 15,000 car crashes.

Even though police statistics show that the fatality rate has declined in recent years, driver behavior is worsening. A Federal Police Commission (FPC) study based on a five-year average (2003 to 2007) reveals that of all fatal accidents, 76 percent were caused by driver errors, which many associate with the issuing of forged driver’s licenses and valid licenses issued to unprepared drivers.

The Ethiopian Roads Authority (*Ye-Ethiopia Menged Transport Balesiltan*) is ranked one of the most corrupt public institutions in the country, due to impropriety in the issuance of driver’s licenses and annual vehicle inspections, according to FEACC reports. The Federal Transport Authority (FTA) also has been exposed for employing extensive corrupt operating procedures.

The directorate’s office estimates that of the approximately two million driver’s licenses issued in Ethiopia, about 4,000 are forgeries.

The Department of Vehicles and Drivers’ Affairs also is under scrutiny. In charge of licensing, inspection and maintenance, it is known that in this department drivers can pass the exam and get their licenses in a shortened period by paying the examiner a bribe from 200 up to 500 birr (US\$12 to US\$30).

“It would be appropriate to rename the road transport authority by calling it ‘Government Theft Squad,’” reads one opinion found in a Roads Authority suggestion box.

In April 2003, the Federal Ethics and Anti-Corruption Commission (FEACC—*Tsere Musina*) presented a detailed report that highlighted problems and issued recommendations.

According to the report, “the activities of the Department of Vehicles and Drivers Affairs is greatly exposed to corruption ranging from petty levels, which, in aggregate, lead to endangering human life and property damage to systemic faults.”

The commission noted that most of the Federal Transport Authority’s procedures can easily lead to corrupt practices. For example, Ethiopia lacks a national regulatory mechanism.

“If actions being taken by the authority are not enforced equally in all regions of the country, the system is subject to bias and malpractice,” according to the report.

Very old vehicles, common on the streets of Ethiopia, also are known for causing damage to both human beings and property. If appropriately tested, most of these cars would not pass vehicle inspection without a bribe.

Cameras and Reforms

One reform that has helped reduce fatalities is the government’s introduction of required third-party insurance. The law forces all vehicles to be insured, and any accident victim has the right to a maximum of 1,000 birr (US\$60) for free medical treatment.

Authorities also have made reforms by introducing BPR (Business Process Re-engineering), a tool feared by most civil servants in the country, which utilizes a computerized driver testing system for theory exams and cameras for practical exams.

The Transport Authority is decentralizing and outsourcing theoretical and practical driver training to 34 institutions, and vehicle inspection and maintenance also is being outsourced. Twelve private firms have taken on vehicle inspection, and vehicle maintenance has been parceled out to another 400 companies.

Unfortunately, many of these measures haven’t had the corruption-busting effect the authorities desired. In regards to the outsourcing of vehicle inspection and maintenance, the corruption was shifted from the government to private businesses and may have worsened traffic accident rates, according to the FEACC’s second report on the transit authority’s operation issued in January 2009.

The report indicated that some of the private drivers’ training institutions are not adequately equipped in terms of professional staff and facilities. Many private firms lacked all the necessary equipment to inspect and maintain vehicles. Also, some private

companies assigned to perform annual vehicle inspections issued certificates without ever viewing the vehicles.

In response, Zerihun Alemayehu, ethics and anti-corruption investigation expert at the FTA, said: “After we compiled the second report in collaboration with FEACC, we ‘re-outsourced’ the training to institutions, which have enhanced capacity with better qualified professionals and equipment.”

Continuing Acts of Corruption

The second FEACC report noted that former Transport Authority employees who had been fired because of malpractice still engage in cheating clients or lead current employees into corruption.

For example, former employees are known to solicit potential clients who want to avoid the bureaucracy and inconvenience of acquiring a driver’s license through official means. Working with a current transit authority employee, these “license brokers” help the clients get a fake license. The former and current Transport Authority employees then share the proceeds from the transaction.

The lack of a networked tracking system among regional transport authority offices makes it easier to use forged driver’s licenses. Without the network, even if traffic police are suspicious about licenses, the transport authority cannot verify their authenticity.

“It requires the active involvement of all citizens in terms of fighting corruption and refraining from using forged driving licenses, said Alemayehu.

But drivers, a very active part in this corrupt scenario, seem to be very comfortable with the current state of affairs. While death and property damage have declined, especially in Addis Ababa, the FPC report linked the drop to pedestrian behavior changes and improvements in vehicle inspection—not driver behavior.

“We need to do a lot in terms of changing driver behavior,” says Abebe Asrat, head of the National Road Safety Office.

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