

BEYOND BORDERS...

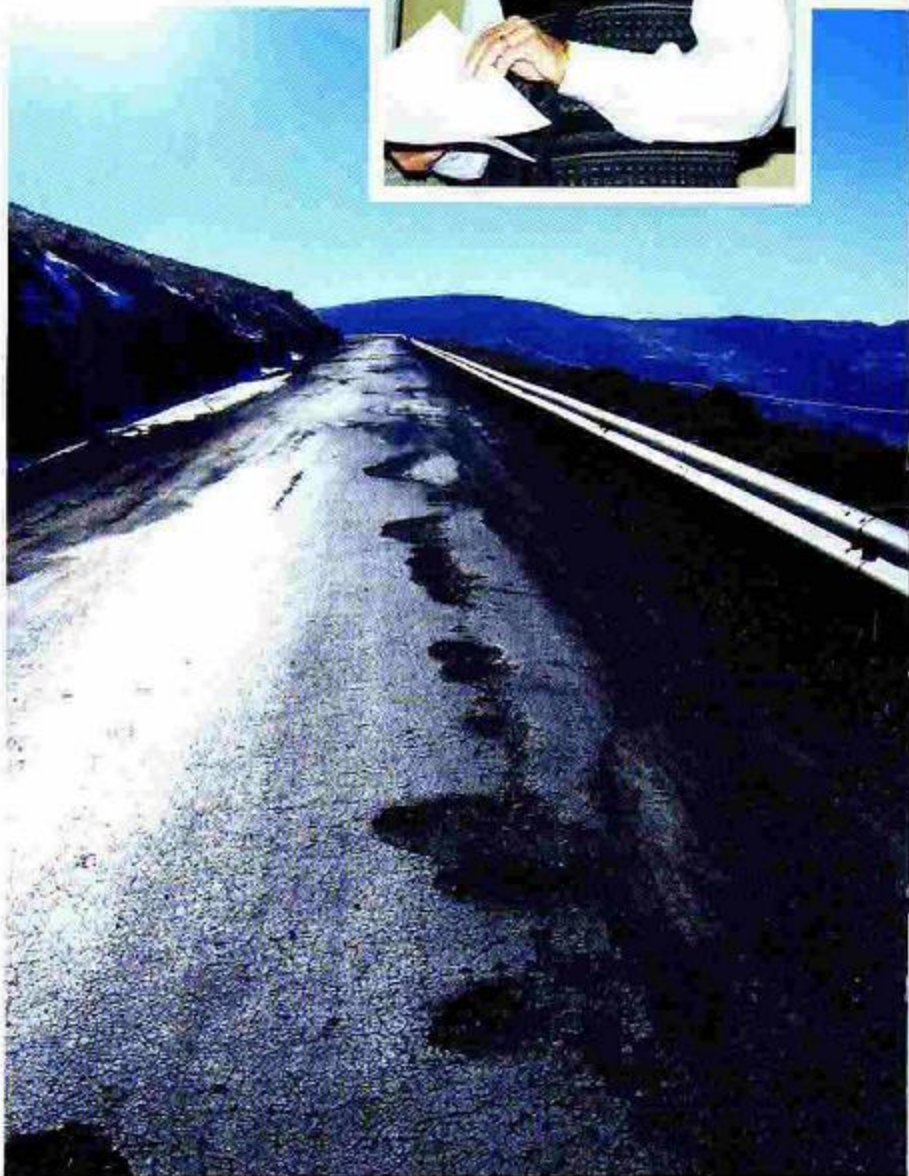
*Cross-border bus and coach operations present a number of additional challenges compared to regional and national routes. They also necessitate dealing with a fair amount of red tape. **FOCUS** takes a look at some of the factors inherent in transporting passengers across our country's borders...*

It is undeniable that, although the road conditions in our country can, at times, be extremely poor, the state of some of our neighbours' road infrastructures is downright atrocious. This can lead to unwanted downtime if a bus or coach falls foul of a pothole. In the case of passenger transporting vehicles, this is exacerbated by the fact that passengers, when forced to wait on the side of the road, will quickly become irritated and anxious, leading to negative publicity if they hold a grudge against the operator. At present, Zimbabwe also poses a number of logistical problems, not least of which is the shortage of fuel in the country.

Other countries also pose a problem in terms of language barriers. Although the majority of people in countries like Botswana, Namibia and Zimbabwe have a sound grasp of English, the Portuguese colonies of Mozambique and Angola are not as anglicised, which could lead to a breakdown of communication when having to deal with unforeseen circumstances such as, for example, a disagreement with foreign officials over permit authenticity.

To ensure that this type of problem is avoided, operators should address any queries to the Cross-Border Road Transport Agency (C-BRTA). The C-BRTA was established in 1998 with the promulgation of the Cross-Border Road Transport Act of 1998. This move was necessitated by the increased flow of freight and passenger traffic in the Southern African Development Community (SADC) region, and aims to facilitate the smooth flow of traffic, thereby helping in the collective effort to encourage social and economic development in the region.

Right: SABOA's Eric Cornelius says there are a number of amendments that need to be made to the Cross-Border Road Transport Act. **Below:** Road conditions here and in our neighbouring countries can cause logistical nightmares.





GREYHOUND

BUS AND COACH

The increasing demand for the services offered by the C-BRTA provides it with an opportunity to be a sector leader both within and outside South African borders: the drive by NEPAD to improve inter-regional trade will inevitably result in further increases in service demands. There are, however, a number of inherent challenges and factors in the cross-border passenger transport industry that will influence any strategy adopted by the agency, and of which operators should also be aware.

Regional instability will give birth to a host of added inconveniences for operators, as well as the C-BRTA, particularly with respect to availability of fuel, as mentioned previously. This is compounded by the generally unsatisfactory levels of passenger safety and transport service quality, not only outside our borders, but also right here at home – as evinced by the spate of horrific bus and coach accidents on our roads this year (see **FOCUS** October 2007).

Cross-border passenger transport can be affected by delays at border posts, while passengers' luggage is often unceremoniously unloaded so that official checks can be carried out. Overloaded passenger transport vehicles from neighbouring countries – and the impact they have on our road infrastructure and safety – are also a concern, particularly when coupled with the chronic overloading present in the local passenger transport and road freight transport sectors.

Along the same vein, the 2010 Soccer World Cup will also pose a number of challenges in terms of the transportation, by coach, of passengers from a number of sub-Saharan African countries into South Africa. A huge number of fans are expected from countries in the SADC region and South Africa's border posts and national road network will need to be able to cope with the added demand.

Eric Cornelius, executive manager of the Southern African Bus Operators Association (SABOA) highlights some of the major issues currently at play in cross-border transport. "There are a number of amendments that need to be made to the Cross-Border Road Transport Act, with one of the most important of these being an extension of the validity period for permits to a maximum of five years. Currently the maximum period for bus permits is one year, placing a great deal of pressure on the licensing authorities to constantly renew expiring permits," says Cornelius.

He also singles out the moratorium on bus permits to Lesotho, which has been in place for a number of years, mainly due to conflict between taxis and buses. "This is affecting the bus industry and needs to be resolved as a matter of urgency!" Cornelius urges.

"SARS is also impounding buses for transporting illegal goods from neighbouring countries into South Africa. The vehicle is only released once the operator pays a huge fine, when the operator is not even aware of the illegal transportation. It seems as if it is only the bus industry that is being targeted by SARS and questions as to whether taxis and aircraft are also impounded for such illegal smuggling remain unanswered."

According to the C-BRTA website it has, through the provisions of the Cross-Border Road Transport Act, instituted several functions in relation to cross-border transport activities. In its regulatory capacity, the agency manages the issuing of permits to cross-border operators. This has helped to build stability and predictability in all cross-border road transport activities. The agency also fosters and maintains consultations and partnerships with other key role-players within South Africa, as well as the rest of the SADC region, including transport authorities, customs and excise authorities, tourism groups and other designated stakeholders, as required by the Act. The law enforcement arm of the agency monitors operators by carrying out countrywide inspections. The inspectors' role is to ensure that operators stay within the prescribed legal parameters. A road transport inspector may, for example, confiscate a permit authorising cross-border road transport, if the vehicle is unroadworthy or poses potential danger to people or property.

Once an operator has been successful in an application for a cross-border transport permit, there are a number of issues that need to be kept in mind. Firstly, a passenger list must be completed at the point of departure, defining the operator's intention to cross the border, while the vehicle must be clearly marked with a cross-border sticker, to alert provincial law enforcement as to its status.

Another very important distinction is the fact that a bus or coach pulling a trailer with passengers' luggage will require an additional permit for the trailer. Permit holders must also ensure that vehicles operating cross-border comply with the permissible overall length and gross vehicle mass stipulated by the road traffic legislation of that country.

Cross-border passenger transporters should also be aware that, once awarded a permit, they cannot discontinue their operations unless they have given 30 days' written notice to the C-BRTA chief executive officer, who may authorise the permit-holder to discontinue the transport of passengers within a shorter period. There are a number of sub-clauses to this, though, so aspiring cross-border operators should thoroughly examine the entire Cross-Border Road Transport Act. ■