

When are we going to get it? We appear to have reduced the illegal 'PH' taxi problem as simply a law enforcement issue. There have been several crimes in the recent past against passengers who used PH cars. Last week, Fourteen-year-old Zareen Ansana Mohammed was beaten to death by PH driver Chunlal Ramsaroop, 27, who was well-known to her and was transporting her since she was a child. Also last week, a 33-year old PH driver who indecently assaulted a 15-year-old girl after he picked her up from school was jailed for six months by Senior Magistrate Jo-Ann Connor in the Rio Claro Magistrates' Court. Earlier, in January, 15-year-old Devika Lalman was found dead a few days after entering a PH car in Chaguanas.

How have the Authorities responded? Acting Police Commissioner, James Philbert, has vowed to rid the country of sexual predators posing as PH drivers. He said, "We have heard the argument that without PH cars some people will not get home, but we can tell you that with PH cars a lot of people are not getting home."

Minister of Works and Transport, Colm Imbert, stated that, "The time has come to take very, very strong action against PH drivers and let them convert their vehicles into H cars...What these PH drivers are doing is simply illegal and quite callous. People look at PH drivers in some way as rescuing the public from transportation problems. But what they are really doing is putting people at risk. Because if you are driving PH, your passengers are not insured...because you are operating as a public service vehicle without insurance."

Then there was an editorial in the Trinidad Express of March 19, 2009, entitled 'Drive PH taxis out of existence.' That author states

that, "The [PH] trade only thrives because of the support of hundreds, perhaps thousands of good citizens who continue to argue the case for 'PH' cars, on the ground that there are a number of routes that are not being served by the 'H' taxis as if this does not completely miss the point which is that, were there to be an effective stamping out of these so-called 'PH' cars, most routes would then be served legally by 'H' cars." That author, in fact, misses the point: PH only thrives because of the absence of H, so removing PH does not necessarily result in provision of H!

I received a letter last week from KW, who said "I tried without success to get on to the radio this morning to say that (1) [Police Commissioner] Philbert was ill-advised to target PH drivers upon the child's murder, and (2) to disagree with the 'necessary evil' description of PH taxis. A transit authority is a credible solution."

I have written several times that there is a proliferation of PH taxis all over the country. They provide service at just about anytime of the day or night to particularly the out-of-the-way areas. They are there when the maxis and taxis go home, such as when heavy rain falls and there is flooding and heavy traffic congestion, and especially on a Friday evening when there is no legal public transport vehicles available. This reveals that there clearly is a huge need for well-organised, planned and managed public transit services and facilities. But, illegal operators and also inconsiderate behaviour and activity by valid transit providers must be discouraged. When a situation has reached chaotic levels, rigorous control and enforcement are required to return road user behaviour into suitable levels of conformity. But do not start with the symptom: illegal activity. Start with the problem!

Has anybody asked why do PH operators exist? I have. There are several reasons including the following: (1) I have already argued that there is a huge need for organised, administered, regulated, scheduled, and convenient public transport. These young men see a relatively easy way to make some quick dollars (the labour is traffic congestion, and you can easily see how they minimise this discomfort by the way they drive). They do not want H on their vehicle, as this is their 'liming mobile' for later on in the nights, or at other times. (2) Many of them are semi-literate, and have very limited reading skills. In fact some of them cannot even read the headlines on a newspaper. This raises another concern – How are they getting their licenses? Why not conduct a survey and see how many young people are purchasing newspapers on a morning – you might be surprised. So these young men have evaluated their limited employment options, and have worked out that driving PH is their best. (3) Also associated with item 2 above is what the Government transport policy of cheap foreign-used cars has facilitated. We know by now that there is roughly one car to every two persons here in TnT, but we are also aware that the majority of people do not have access to a private auto. Just check out the taxi and maxi stands and bus terminals every morning and evening, especially when it rains, and on Friday evenings. Some people with financial wherewithal have purchased several private autos and contracted young men to 'work' them to pay back for the cars as well as bring in additional income. (4) Whenever I am asked to speak on transport issues, I make it my duty to advise listeners that generally when a man has money he buys a car, but when a woman has money she seeks the interest of her children and family first. Therefore,

the primary casualties of lack of access to transport are women and children. Extending this hypothesis to the fact that the decision-makers are predominantly men, and you see why the solutions are skewed.

It is not the PH that are putting the people at risk, but Government inaction on regulating and managing the public transport industry is putting all transit patrons at risk. More on this next week.

e-mail: info@ccost.org