



Foiling truck hijackings

by Fidelis Zvomuya

Based on the advertisements, it would seem that technology has made it impossible - or at least stunningly foolhardy - to steal a vehicle. Tracking systems with GPS can pinpoint any vehicle and direct the authorities straight to the thieves. However, while the technology may be getting better, professional vehicle thieves have stepped up their game too, which means that some tracking systems may be better than others.

Combating truck hijackings is not a simple matter, especially when the thieves are targeting only the trailer or cargo. Conventional fleet management and wired tracking devices in the truck simply don't work if the trailer is dragged away or if the devices are disabled.

Thousands of trucks stolen

Truck drivers on South Africa's roads are under siege by armed robbers who have hijacked more than 1 400 of their vehicles over the past year, according to South African Police Service (SAPS) figures. This means that, statistically, 10 cars are stolen in this country every hour.

In its 2010 yearly crime statistics, the SAPS reports that 1 412 trucks were hijacked between April 2009 and March 2010, mostly by suspected syndicates. This is a massive increase, as the country recorded a total of 12 434 car hijackings in 2005, surging to 14 201 during the 2007/2008 period. The number of truck hijackings increased from 829

in 2005/2006 to 1 245 in 2007/2008, which has now increased to 1 400 over the last period of review (2009/2010).

According to Colonel Eugene Opperman, police spokesperson, Gauteng recorded the highest number of truck hijackings countrywide, with 860 cases.

Of the cases reported in the province, the hotspots are the R59 between Vereeniging and Johannesburg, the R103 between Cornelia and Heidelberg and the areas between Nigel, Carletonville, Delmas, Villiers and the Vaal, says Colonel Opperman.

Mpumalanga recorded the second highest number of hijackings, 197, while 127 were reported in KwaZulu-Natal.

Hijacking database

Colonel Opperman says that the SAPS has already started creating a database of truck hijackings and is relying on the transport industry's support.

"If we are to break the back of the escalating truck hijackings, we have to work with the industry. They must provide the police with full information about the hijackings and incidents involving trucks. This must include where and how it happened and who was involved."

Another challenge facing transport operators with tracking units fitted to their trucks or trailers is that these devices require power from the truck, making them easy to find and therefore susceptible to disablement if they are separated from their power supply.

Latest tracking technology

It would seem however that the introduction of a self-powered, wireless unit called Mtrack, which is supplied by Electronic Tracking Systems Ltd (ETS) is slowly becoming a solution, as it has already achieved a great deal of success around the world, and especially in South Africa, where it has been in use for the past five years.

“Hijackings in the trucking industry are mostly about the load as this is the primary target of the crime syndicates”

The technology is Norwegian and the product is built in the Sony Ericsson factory in Malaysia.

The battery life of self-powered devices is usually measured in days or weeks, but Mtrack's patented power management algorithm enables the device to last for up to three years on factory-set reporting intervals, explains Deon Bailey, managing director of ETS.

Deon says that the majority of their clients who run their devices on a 40-minute sleep cycle get between eight and 12 months from the battery.

“This means that it is now practical to imbue the Mtrack into a vehicle, trailer, cargo or any other moveable asset. Obviously, the more times you have to access a device to recharge it or replace the battery, the more you compromise your security,” he adds.

Mtrack uses the GSM network to get an initial macro location, and then radio frequency to track the device to within one metre.

GSM units are not as easy to shield as GPS-based systems. “Mtrack doesn't have to ‘see the sky,’ we are able to track

inside warehouses and buildings and even underground locations such as parking lots,” he says.

The system has a user-friendly web-based interface, making it possible for clients to access the system and view their devices from anywhere. Each user is given a unique user ID with custom user rights. This enables the user to do what he is allowed to do, and protects the system from unauthorised use.

Depending on user rights, a user can access usage reports, locate the units and communicate with the units. All communication, configuring, daily health checks, and more are performed remotely through the GSM network.

Because Mtrack is wireless it is also totally mobile. It can be moved from one vehicle to another or one load to another without expensive installations.

Truck hijacking about the load

Dave Renton, managing director of Rentrack, a long established stolen vehicle recovery operation, says that “hijackings in the trucking industry are mostly about the load, as this is the primary target of the crime syndicates.”

Dave attributes this to the value of the load most delivery trucks are carrying, as opposed to the value of the vehicle carrying the cargo.

According to Colonel Opperman, truck drivers are usually unarmed and alone on deserted roads. “This makes them no match for hijackers, whose tactics include forcing trucks off the road by driving in front of them while pointing guns and using police-like blue lights or even marked police vehicles to force drivers to pull over.

“Drivers are often forced into the gangs' vehicles or into the back of their trucks and are

driven off to deserted areas where they are robbed of their personal belongings before the hijackers make off with their trucks," he says.

Zweli Mnisi, police ministry spokesperson, says his ministry is working with law enforcement agencies in the SADC region to combat the cross-border trafficking of trucks.

He says the Anti-Truck Hijacking Unit has been deployed to combat these crimes and crack the syndicates behind hijackings: "We suspect that the hijackings are the work of organised crime syndicates. These guys plan with precision and seem to have lots of information, because you don't just wake up and decide to hijack a truck."

The increase in number and frequency of these hijackings has also resulted in the growth of the vehicle tracking business.

According to its managing director, Mark Rousseau, fleet management and vehicle tracking company DigiCore has seen remarkable growth in its vehicle tracking division, and has a 93% recovery rate of hijacked trucks. He says the increase in delivery truck hijackings is relatively high during the so-called 'silly season', between November and December, and hijackers target vehicles that seem to be carrying 'many orders'.

Deon says one of the biggest new trends his company has seen is that of hijackers now using a 'clean' horse to tow the trailer and cargo away. "This horse (which can usually be traced back to a previous hijacking) has been thoroughly cleaned by the thieves to remove any tracking device. They then tow the trailer away in the belief that the trailer and cargo are unprotected."

Insider assistance

In 2003, a UNISA Forensic Investigation department lecturer, Dr Rudolph Zinn, conducted an intensive research programme

on vehicle hijackings. This study found that the majority of truck hijackings take place because of inside information about the routes, delivery points and what is being transported received from workers at the firm or drivers or support personnel on the delivery trucks.



Gavin Kelly, technical and operations manager of the Road Freight Association of South Africa (RFA), says the increase in hijackings are obviously bad, and his summary is that criminals have returned to their old hijacking ways because they once again see trucks as a soft target.

He says that a scaling down of operations by the SAPS because of a lack of capacity may also have contributed: "They decided, for example, to dissolve the Flying Squad.

"There are no alternatives to road, as rail only works for bulk cargoes over distances, while air freight may be beneficial between major centres or countries."

As part of its service to members, the RFA makes its members aware of so-called trucking hot spots or no-go areas.

"The cargo is sold within hours after the hijacking and the vehicles are generally reassembled, which means that parts of other vehicles are being used to make the hijacked vehicle impossible to trace," the research reports.

It also warns that the increase in hijackings on South African roads could have a significant impact on the economy, particularly by impacting indirect costs such as that of increasing safety measures to monitor vehicles, using tracking devices, vetting of personnel through the use of polygraph testing, as well as the need for safety and support vehicles to guard delivery trucks.

The increase in incidents of truck hijackings also lead to dramatic increases in insurance premiums and could dent the confidence of clients in the efficiency of deliveries.

Information about incidents involving trucks, be it a hijacking or just suspicious activity, can be sent to the SAPS on by sms on 082 332 4378 or by calling Crime Stop on 0860 01 011.

SAPS statistics

Number of truck hijackings (2009/2010)

Eastern Cape: 57
 Free State: 67
 Gauteng: 860
 KwaZulu-Natal: 127
 Limpopo: 19
 Mpumalanga: 197
 North West: 70
 Northern Cape: 1
 Western Cape: 14 **M&J**




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