

'No brand is above the law'

Carmaker Ford had to be threatened with an ultimatum to make it take action - "Either you sort out your combusting Kuga SUVs or we will".



The ultimatum, given by the National Consumer Commission last week, yesterday led to Ford announcing the recall of 4556 Ford Kuga 1.6s made between 2012 and 2014.

The recall was announced after a meeting on Friday between senior Ford executives and National Consumer Commission lawyers. The Ford executives "pleaded" for more time but to no avail.

The carmaker had been given until 28 February 2017 to resolve the problem but a sudden increase in the number of fires prompted the commission to order Ford to announce the recall yesterday, 16 January.

Yesterday Ford SA chief executive Jeffery Nemeth was at pains to claim that customer safety was the company's top priority.

But, in an interview with *The Times*, he said none of the company's executives would lose his job because of the debacle.

The company maintains that the Kuga fires were caused by a coolant system fault exacerbated by South Africa's hot climate.

Investigations have revealed that the fires were caused by overheating, which led to cylinder heads cracking and oil leaking.

Recalled vehicles will be subjected to a software update and a check on the cylinder head, he said.

The compulsory safety recall is being made only after 48 of the family SUVs burst into flames since December 2015. Eleven fires occurred this month.

Johannesburg businessman Reshall Jimmy was killed when his Kuga caught fire while he was on holiday in the Wilderness, Western Cape, in December 2015.

"One incident is one too many," said National Consumer Commission member Ebrahim Mohamed, "and this issue has dragged on for too long."

"No brand is above the law. The commission has concerns for the users of the Kuga and the various life-threatening incidents.

"A product that poses risks to consumers doesn't have a place in our market place."

Ford's Nemeth said that although the investigation of the Jimmy fire had not been concluded, Ford believed that it was a unique case and not caused by an engine fire.

A commission source told *The Times* that the commission had ordered Ford to recall the Kugas last week but the company's executives had "pleaded" for more time.

"They cited the chaos it would cause if they had to do it last week. The commission said 'fine', but it had to be announced today [yesterday].

"The ultimatum was 'If you don't, we will,' the source said.

Mohamed said the National Consumer Commission decided last week that if Ford did not issue a recall then it would.

"Ford must come up with a strategy to deal with the problem and provide bi-weekly updates," he said.

"This is a critical safety matter and we will be monitoring it closely.

"People must know that this recall is not the end of the matter. The commission can still conduct further investigations and can rope in other government bodies."

Nemeth said: "We don't take this lightly. The investigation will look at a number of issues around the cooling system and why warning lights and systems were not responding as they should.

"We have investigated every case that was brought to us and have taken 15 engines from the affected cars for examination in the US and in Europe."

He said the company would evaluate the information obtained from the examinations and use it to design and build robust systems that would prevent more such fires. Nemeth said: "People whose cars burnt must go to their insurance companies. It is an insurance matter.

"We will interact with the victims and the insurance companies - and we hope they will buy another Ford."

Source: The Times

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