

MPs accuse Transport Canada of inaction over Toyota safety concerns

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OTTAWA _ Transport Canada came under fire from MPs on Thursday over its handling of safety concerns with Toyota vehicles after disclosing that authorities had received 17 acceleration-related complaints before last fall's recall.

Department officials were called on the carpet by opposition MPs at a committee meeting to answer why they did not respond more quickly to the problems.

And one MP on the Commons transport committee accused the department of having too cosy a relationship with Toyota Canada, noting it had applauded the automaker's efforts in issuing a recall last fall.

Since then, the world's No. 1 automaker has got a black eye over mounting concerns about the safety of its vehicles, resulting in a string of embarrassing admissions and recalls involving more than eight million vehicles worldwide.

Of those, some 270,000 have been recalled in Canada and more than four million in the United States, where safety groups have also accused the U.S. National Transportation Safety Association of being too cozy with the auto industry.

"NHTSA has been viewed by the motor vehicle industry for years as a lapdog, not a watchdog," Joan Claybrook, a former NHTSA administrator under then-president Jimmy Carter, said in prepared testimony for a congressional hearing Thursday.

The U.S. National Highway Traffic Safety Administration has tied 52 deaths to crashes south of the border allegedly caused by the accelerator problems, and the agency has received new complaints from owners who had their cars fixed and said their vehicles suddenly accelerated afterward.

Transport officials defended their response and noted there had been no confirmed cases of fatalities in Canada.

"When we receive an acceleration problem, it does not necessarily mean that it is related to a sticky accelerator," said Gerard MacDonald, the Transport Department's associate deputy minister.

"Of those 17 (complaints), there was nothing in the subsequent investigation that took place that gave them reason to believe it was the result of a sticky accelerator."

Officials said they were not aware of any complaints of a "sticky pedal" until Toyota informed the department in January it had received five.

But MPs lashed out in anger and disbelief at what they said was an inadequate and lackadaisical response.

"I have no idea what they are thinking down there _ they don't even have the list of complaints Toyota has received," said NDP critic Brian Masse, a former autoworker in Windsor, Ont.

"I'm totally disappointed in Transport Canada. They can't even tell us how many people Toyota has been in touch with to get their vehicles fixed. Today was stunning."

Liberal MP Joe Volpe accused officials and Transport Minister John Baird of taking a passive approach to a problem that has put Canadian lives in jeopardy.

Officials should have been pro-active in seeking out answers from Toyota rather than waiting for the automaker to inform them, he said.

"The minister is not asking; the department is not asking and Toyota is not offering," he said. "Everybody else in the world is looking at this and we're not."

Volpe said Transport officials were not even aware of concerns the root cause may stem from a software error, rather than sticky pedals, until MPs brought it up at a technical briefing with officials on Monday.

Toyota Canada executives have been asked to the hearings next week, but Volpe said the committee needs to question those in charge _ North American chief executive Yoshi Inaba, or the head of the company, Akio Toyoda, both of whom testified before the U.S. Congress.

There was no immediate response from Toyota.

Conservative committee member Brian Jean defended the department, saying it was investigating all possibilities.

"They certainly seem to be on top of it, and they are keeping Canadians safe," he told reporters after the meeting.

"The reality is . . . cars today . . . are much more complicated than they were 10 or 20 years ago," he said, adding the problem may stem from "a magnet, or floor mats, or sticky pedal or, in fact, human error."

Toyota has been moving to install brake override systems on many of its vehicles. Such systems automatically reduce the engine's power when the brake and accelerator pedals are depressed at the same time "under certain driving conditions."

It will be included on most new Toyota and Lexus models sold in Canada by the end of this year, Toyota officials have said.