

Ford at odds with investigators over Kugas

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11 Jan 2017

Ford Motor Company and South African investigators traded blows on Monday over the firelinked death of a Ford Kuga driver in December 2015, and reports of at least 40 more Kugas bursting into flames since then.



Ford said the refusal of SA's police and private investigators to provide the US company with their findings into the causes of the fire that led to the death of Reshall Jimmy, was hampering its efforts to protect motorists from similar fires in the future.

Ford SA has applied to the High Court in Cape Town for access to all evidence in police dockets. Police have said they would oppose the application. However, forensic investigator David Klatzow said Ford was the obstructive party. The US parent had initially declined to share the results of its own preliminary investigation, and still refused to release Kuga electrical-wiring diagrams that would allow Klatzow's own inquiries to move forward.

Ford's forensic analysis so far, he said, had been "shallow" and "worthless". Ford also claimed it had been denied full access to the Jimmy vehicle until last month but Klatzow retorted: "They have had the same opportunity as everyone else, for over a year."

Jimmy was found dead in Wilderness, in the southern Cape, with his seatbelt still fastened - leading investigators to suspect

he may have been rendered unconscious by gases released by the fire. Klatzow said the fire had started beneath the dashboard, between the engine and passenger cabin. Eyewitness statements reported flames at the front. Ford disagreed, saying evidence suggested the fire had started at the rear of the vehicle.

Only now are Klatzow and fellow investigators close to learning exactly what happened. He said the Kuga was still in Oudtshoorn, waiting to be transported to Pretoria for full-scale laboratory analysis. This would include burning samples of materials from the sports utility vehicle to determine, among other things, what gases they emitted.

Klatzow said evidence so far suggested that the Jimmy incident was very different to subsequent Kuga fires, in which owners reported engines suddenly bursting into flames. "The Jimmy engine is almost untouched. You could take it out and sell it." No injuries to occupants have been reported from other fires.

UK-based Ford spokesman John Gardiner said analysis so far suggested the fires had been caused by overheating. Kuga owners had been advised to have their vehicles checked for possible damage to coolant containers and water hoses.

Local investigators, however, have pointed to potential cracks in plastic fuel-line components, causing petrol to spray onto hot engines. Despite consumer calls for an official recall of all at-risk vehicles, Gardiner said Ford wanted to wait until it was sure what the problem was and how to fix it.

"We want to conclude our investigation into these fires as quickly as possible but it must be done thoroughly. That's why we need to see evidence collected by everyone, including police dockets."

Ford Kugas sold in SA are built in Europe.

Fires have been limited to 1.6L models built in 2013 and 2014. For reasons which Ford is still investigating, 1.5L and 2L variants are unaffected. Of about 18,000 Kugas sold in SA, about 6,300 have 1.6L engines.

Many imported vehicles, from all manufacturers, are modified for local conditions, to take account of extremes of altitude and temperature, dust, dirt roads and SA's driving habits. Ford technical officials were not available on Monday to explain what changes, if any, were made to Kugas shipped to SA.

Gardiner said there were no fire reports from other markets using European-sourced Kugas. But in the US, the Ford Escape, which is built on the same engineering platform as Kuga, has had problems. In October, Ford recalled thousands of vehicles because of a potential fuel leak that could cause engine fires.

To put that into perspective, however, in November alone, 20 global car and truck brands were forced to recall vehicles for safety reasons, of which five (not including Ford) were fire hazards.

Despite warnings that the Kuga saga would cause significant reputational damage to the Ford brand in SA, sales of Ford vehicles, including Kuga, held up well in December. Based on previous local safety issues with the likes of Renault, Toyota and VW, any sales "hit" to the overall brand is likely to be short-lived.

There have been anecdotal stories of some motor dealers not wanting to accept Kugas as trade-ins. While some independent used vehicle dealers may be nervous, a Ford insider said yesterday that the company and franchised dealers would not allow resale values to undermine the Ford brand.

Source: Business Day