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Caution, Road Works Ahead!

Location: A roadwork zone just after the exit of a 2,500m tunnel on the A3 highway near Aschaffenburg, Germany: two policemen are killed while trying to clear accident debris from the site. Three days later, same location, a motor cyclist is killed. A lorry driver misses the end of a traffic jam, starts skidding and rams a motorcyclist into a heavy goods vehicle ahead. And so the saga continued. Over a period of just four months this road works zone clocked up 190 accidents and a death toll of three. The bottom line is that the number of accidents occurring had quadrupled in comparison to the same period during the previous year when there was no road work zone.

Why did this happen? This is the question asked by the experts when conducting the second pan European

road works zones survey for EuroTest 2006. Across ten countries, 53 road work zones were inspected in both directions, using state of the art measuring systems (GPS, a reference station, position measuring equipment, digital and analogue cameras), loaded in a test vehicle. The safety potential of each zone was determined by examining the quality of the traffic routing –guidance through the zone provided by the layout, road signing and road markings, the condition of the road surface, orientation at night and also information provided to road users about the road works. Potential accident risk as a result of the presence of factors such lane reduction, tapering traffic to the opposite lane, having two-way traffic or two-way points of entry and exit for traffic was also factored into the assessment.

A quarter of the zones inspected scored top marks with a rating of “very good” while about half were considered “good”. Seven road work zones were considered “acceptable” and five failed the test with the assessment “poor”.

The winning road work zone in 2006 was found in the UK. Located close to Birmingham on the M42 this site had almost a perfect score of 100% of the total possible points available when tested during the day. However, when the same test was rerun by night, failings were found that rated the road work zone as only “acceptable”. British operators reorganise their road works zones by night so as to be able to intensify their works during the lower traffic periods.

The overall loser in this year’s survey, an Italian road work located in Italy on the A3 Cosenza-Salerno road near Eboli, presented acute problems with regard to traffic routing and the provision of information to road users.

According to Caroline Ofoegbu, International EuroTest Co-ordinator, “All over Europe we found consistently that the lack of information provided to road users, prior to entering a road works zone, while passing through and on exiting was a major problem. Europeans driving across Europe can not be expected to inform themselves about every road work they might encounter. Moreover it is doubtful if they actually could.”

Regardless of the good results emerging from this year’s road works EuroTest, more must be done identify systematically what causes accidents in road works zones. Progress has been slow since the EU funded ARROWS study drew up a set of recommendations for establishing a European standard for road works zones in 1998. The crux of the problem still remains: though road works cover just a tiny percentage of our

road network, accidents occur in these zones with a much higher frequency than usual. In order to effectively improve the safety of road works zones in Europe for both road workers and road users the precise causes of accidents still need to be identified and eliminated.

Overcoming the hazards presented by road work zones would prevent accidents, serious injuries and deaths. This outcome could make an important contribution to the objective of the European Union’s Road Safety Action plan to halve the number of deaths on European Roads by 2010. Policy makers, in their current review of the Road Safety Action plan, would do well to call for more research into what can be done to prevent even more carnage occurring in road works zones.

EuroTest proposes a three-step approach:

1. The creation of a publicly accessible Europe wide database cataloguing road works zones accident data and providing best practices in road work zone management. Such a database would require continuous updating
2. More robust research into the exact causes of accidents in road works zones with concrete solutions to the identified problems proposed
3. Increased mobility in a borderless Europe means more motorists using foreign highways where they have to find their way through unfamiliar situations. Guidelines leading to a Europe wide standardization of the road works zones management would do much to prevent potential accidents just waiting to happen, not to mention save human lives.

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Notes to Editors:

EuroTest, a mobility testing platform comprising 17 European motoring and touring organisations/ automobile clubs is committed to follow up this topic and will organize a new road works test in the following year. In the meantime EuroTest will continue its awareness campaign towards national and international stakeholders and their 40 million members.

For more information contact:

Sinziana Radu

s.radu@eurotestmobility.com

