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Bilingual software system regulates truck movement in ASEZA

By Victoria Macchi

AMMAN — Instead of sharing roads with tourists and clogging the port area, trucks in Aqaba abide by a new system as of last December — and two months after its implementation the plan seems to be working, according to administrators and drivers.

“About a year-and-a-half ago, truckers were worried about their future — ASEZA was asked to step in and deal with it,” explained Shadi Majali, commissioner of customs and revenues in the Aqaba Special Economic Zone Authority (ASEZA).

What resulted was a public-private partnership to automate the trucking industry in the zone.

A web-based system to monitor and direct truck traffic in the Aqaba Special Economic Zone (ASEZ) is increasing transportation efficiency and public security, in addition to mitigating pollution, project officials told The Jordan Times.

The National Freight Information and Transportation Hub Truck Control System (NAFITH TCS) allows ASEZA to monitor trucks from entry to exit in the free zone with its bilingual software system.

By switching from a manual to an automated system, the authority can now maintain and share the manifest of drivers, trucks, trailers and cargo. This includes ensuring that the truckers' licences are updated, and that they are transporting the appropriate type of goods for their truck — as well as regulating that the cargo is being safely transported.

NAFITH links nearly 40 destinations including warehouses, ports and transport companies along the newly designated trucking routes. Aqaba's limited coastline has the challenge of balancing fun and function; one way to mitigate the collision of the two is to divert trucks from tourist areas and designate the roads they can use. Straying from these roads results in fines.

In order to enter ASEZ, truck drivers must pass through designated checkpoints. At these booths, their information and licensing is verified in the database. Only when the cargo is ready to be picked up are the trucks allowed in; until then, the vehicles can wait in the newly constructed rest areas. However, since the ports and customs are linked to the system, waiting is minimised and trucks generally arrive only when the companies and drivers know cargo will be ready.

Private companies can tap into the Internet-based system from any web browser and do not have to pay for its use; trucking companies — of which roughly 110 deal with ASEZA — are charged JD1 per trip into the free zone.

Also as part of the system, truckers must now be registered with a transport company and possess an entry permit for the ASEZ — requirements that project officials from local firm Telaterra (which teamed with US-based Freight Desk Technologies to develop the Aqaba trucking management solution) say will protect drivers and the public by increasing accountability for regulatory infractions and stimulate competition to provide better services.

According to Majali, the increased competition is pressuring transport companies to provide better services — including better trucks and skilled drivers — to earn more business.

“Within six months to a year, the rules of business — including market effects and competition — will start taking effect,” he added.

In addition, the truck, trailer and driver must be registered with the Ministry of Transportation ensuring that they are carrying the right types of cargo.

The end result is a reduction in cost and a minimisation of time lost, overall benefiting trade in the ASEZ and related professions — affecting 50,000 to 100,000 people according to Telaterra Director Samir Mubarak.

Entries into the ASEZ have increased by 5 to 10 per cent, Majali told The Jordan Times, as direct result of the NAFITH system.

Furthermore, ASEZA employed 240 new hires, 75 per cent of whom came from Aqaba Governorate, to man the booths and implement the NAFITH system.

According to an example cited by Telaterra's NAFITH project manager Nourah Mehyar, Aqaba's fuel ports used to see 400 trucks come through in a 24-hour period; now the same number picks up cargo in half that time.

“This is a system where, a year-and-a-half ago there were strikes.... And this is the bloodline of Jordan,” Majali said in reference to the 2003 truckers' protests over disorganisation at the port.

The Aqaba pilot programme began in late 2005. According to a statement by Telaterra, the vision for NAFITH is to expand throughout the Middle East and North Africa.

“This system can be opened up,” said Majali, “ASEZA suggests that at a minimum, more rest areas be established on the main trucking routes [in the Kingdom].”

“Truckers, companies, ... even the police are happy,” he added of the response to NAFITH.

Although there are no official statistics, police in Aqaba told Majali that road accidents involving trucks decreased significantly after the pilot programme's implementation.

Telaterra is looking to automate other transportation systems in the Kingdom; one of them would involve monitoring transit trucking, or the cargo vehicles that pass through the borders but with destinations other than Jordan.

A tracking system could involve placing temporary devices on trucks to ensure their route.

“[NAFITH] is a true e-government project... it enhances transportation, streamlines information, uses computers and affects 50,000 to 100,000 Jordanians,” according to Mubarak

“That's where e-government should concentrate,” he added.

The NAFITH feasibility study and pilot programme was funded by a \$600,000 grant from US Trade and Development Agency.

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