

Honda Expands 15-Month Air Bag Recall

by Malcolm Foster, Associated Press Writer

TOKYO (AP) — Honda's expansion of its global recall for faulty air bags suggests automakers are turning cautious amid consumer scrutiny of Toyota's safety lapses, a trend that could see more recalls in the coming months.

Honda Motor Co., Japan's No. 2 automaker, said Wednesday it was recalling an additional 437,000 cars globally, bringing its 15 month-old recall to nearly 1 million vehicles.

Intense criticism of Toyota Motor Corp. that it was too slow to acknowledge problems and come clean with consumers before recalls involving over 8 million vehicles has Japanese corporate chieftains wanting to do everything they can to avoid a similar fate.

"No one wants to be Akio Toyoda," said Kurt Sanger, an analyst at Deutsche Securities in Tokyo, referring to Toyota's president who has apologized repeatedly for his company's woes.

"You're seeing the down side of not doing it," Sanger said of Toyota's recent reluctance to recall vehicles. Automakers are "obviously going to be motivated to be more aggressive on these things."

Showing the chastening effect of bad publicity, Toyota on Wednesday declined to accept a Japanese government energy efficiency award given to its Prius hybrid, saying the honor is not appropriate for a car hit by massive recalls.

Nissan Motor Co. is clearly on guard. The company understands the need to "make maximum efforts toward safety and quality," said Chief Operating Officer Toshiyuki Shiga on Tuesday, when asked about how his company might be affected by woes at rival Toyota.

"With this crisis, if you will, as a catalyst, we want to further accelerate those efforts and we want to exert even greater caution," Shiga said.

Honda's expanded recall came a day after Toyota said it would recall nearly 440,000 of its flagship 2010 Prius cars and other hybrids due to a braking glitch — further damaging its once sterling image.

Since November last year the world's No. 1 automaker has recalled nearly 8.5 million vehicles for faults that include floor mats that can entangle the gas pedal and gas pedals that can stick, causing sudden acceleration.

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Published on Industrial Maintenance & Plant Operation (<http://www.impomag.com>)

Toyota faces more scrutiny next week, when Yoshimi Inaba, head of the automaker's North American operations, will be grilled in a congressional hearing called to examine the spate of safety problems.

Honda acknowledges heightened sensitivity among consumers about recalls — but denies that the expanded recall was driven by outside factors, said Natsuno Asanuma, manager of public relations at Honda in Tokyo.

"We are following the normal procedure, so it doesn't mean customers' feelings changed our attitude," she said. "There are strict regulations regarding recalls."

Still, analysts predict that automakers will err on the side of caution given all the bad publicity Toyota has received, including accusations that it covered up some problems — which the company denies.

Problems that in the past were dealt with by a service campaign notifying owners to drop by the repair shop at their convenience may be raised to the level of full-fledged recalls, they say.

"All automakers are going to be wary about this," said Ryouichi Saito, analyst at Mizuho Investors Securities in Tokyo. "They're going to be quicker to announce recalls about anything that even appears fishy."

Honda's expanded recall for air bags includes 378,000 cars in the U.S., some 41,000 cars in Canada and 17,000 cars in Japan, Australia and elsewhere in Asia. It includes certain 2001 and 2002 Accord sedans, Civic compacts, Odyssey minivans, CR-V small sport utility vehicles and some 2002 Acura TL sedans.

Honda said it will replace the driver's side air bag inflator in the cars because they can deploy with too much pressure, causing the inflator to rupture and injure or kill the driver. Honda said it is aware of 12 incidents linked to the problem — one death in May 2009 and 11 injuries. The company said it is not aware of any problems happening after July 2009.

Since it first announced the recall to the U.S. National Highway Traffic Safety Administration in November 2008, a total of 952,118 vehicles have been recalled.

Honda decided to expand the recall after a company investigation determined that more cars might contain defective air bag inflators, made by supplier Takata Corp., based in Tokyo.

"It took time to come to that conclusion because we had to do many tests," said Honda's Asanuma. The company has tried all along to "communicate everything we have found out," she said.

Last month, Honda recalled 646,000 Fit hatchbacks worldwide because of a glitch that could cause water to enter the power window mechanism, causing components to overheat.

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Recalls are a regular occurrence in the auto industry, but they are getting more attention now because Toyota's recalls have been so big — startling for a company's with reputation for quality.

"Every automaker knows they're lucky not to be in Toyota's situation right now," said Sanger.

Associated Press writers Jay Alabaster and Mari Yamaguchi in Tokyo contributed to this report.

Source URL (retrieved on 01/28/2015 - 11:36am):

http://www.impomag.com/news/2010/02/honda-expands-15-month-air-bag-recall?qt-recent_content=0