

Takata rejects broader airbag recall

WASHINGTON: A senior Takata Corp. executive on Wednesday, 3 December, defended the Japanese company's rejection of a nationwide US recall of its potentially deadly airbags, insisting that testing data did not back such an action.



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But the top US auto safety official warned that Takata had not yet solved the reason for shrapnel-firing airbag eruptions thought to have killed five people, and said the company and car makers could face court action for their reticence to widen recalls.

Hiroshi Shimizu, senior vice president for quality control at the auto parts maker, told a Congressional hearing that Takata did not agree with the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration's demand for a recall of all cars in the US with the suspect Takata airbags on the driver's side.

The NHTSA had given Takata until Tuesday night to broaden the existing recall, which has been limited only to cars in hot and humid areas where the risk of an explosive airbag deployment is believed to be much higher.

But Takata rejected the call in a letter to the NHTSA Tuesday, saying its tests showed no necessity to expand the existing action, and noting that supplies of replacement inflators, the part linked to the problem, are still too few to support a full national recall program.

Shimizu told the hearing of a subcommittee of the House Energy and Commerce Committee on the issue that recent testing of thousands of inflators has only showed problems with passenger-side airbags.

Of around 4,000 airbag inflators tested in recent months, Shimizu said they have detected dangerous ruptures in about 60 passenger-side airbags, and none in driver-side airbags.

Those that ruptured, he said, all came from Florida and Puerto Rico, both hot and humid climates.

"Based on the data we are collecting... the data still supports that we should remain focused on the regions with high temperature and high humidity," Shimizu said.

But legislators expressed serious doubts about the company's arguments, amid worries that Takata still does not know exactly why the problems persist.

"I don't think there's any excuse for not solving the problem," Florida Representative Gus Bilirakis told Shimizu.

With the problems dating back to at least 2008, the company and investigators have identified several causes over time.

Shimizu said the causes were all rooted in now-resolved manufacturing problems, and not airbag design.

About 10 million vehicles from 10 manufacturers have been recalled already in the United States to address the problem, and at least eight million in other countries.

NHTSA Deputy Administrator David Friedman told the panel that the regulator continued to harbor doubts about whether the causes of the airbag problem are fully known.

The agency now believes the humidity issue "is simply not the dominant factor" in problems with driver-side airbags.

"They have not yet gotten to the root cause of this issue," he said of Takata.

He warned that both the company and automakers face legal action, including fines of up to \$35 million, if they do not address the problem.

"If Takata and the automakers continue to refuse to act, we are going to have to take them to court," Friedman said.

At the same hearing, Honda North America Executive Vice President Rick Schostek said the automaker is "seriously considering" a nationwide recall of all Takata-equipped Hondas.

At the same time, Schostek admitted, "Should there be an expansion to a nationwide action, we believe that a parts shortage may occur despite Takata's efforts to increase the supply of inflators."

He said Honda is discussing using substitute inflators from other manufacturers to fill the shortfall.

"We still believe that the highest risk is in the southern areas," he said.

Source: AFP