

GM boss 'deeply sorry' after deadly crashes

WASHINGTON, USA: Conceding company officials knew of their cars' potentially deadly ignition switches for years, GM chief Mary Barra apologised on Tuesday (2 April) and said the car manufacturer had a "civic responsibility" to make things right.



GM's chief executive Mary Barra has apologised to people affected by the safety recall and met with those who lost loved ones in accidents. Image: LinkedIn

The manufacturer is under fire for not recalling Chevrolet Cobalts, Saturn Ions and other General Motors models over the past decade, despite its own evidence that the defects were posing a major hazard.

Thirteen deaths have been linked to the problems, and GM eventually issued mass recalls this year.

Barra said GM has acknowledged the problem, launched an exhaustive review to determine what and who is responsible, and pledged top-to-bottom changes in shifting from a "cost culture" to a focus on safety and quality.

"Today's GM will do the right thing," she told a House investigations panel in Washington. "That begins with my sincere apologies to everyone who has been

affected by this recall," she added. "I am deeply sorry."

Lawmakers pointed to internal documents showing GM at first refused to change the faulty switches because it would have been too costly. The lawmakers, and Barra, expressed astonishment that the company went ahead with using the parts even though they did not meet GM standards.

"That is not something I find acceptable," Barra said. "Today, if we know there is a safety defect on our vehicles, we don't look at the cost but at the speed at which we can fix the problem," she added.

March on Capitol Hill

Heaping pressure on the car company, weeping relatives marched up Capitol Hill, clutching images of their loved ones, to demand accountability from GM and tell how their children died in vehicles they said the company knew were faulty.

Barra said she met privately with crash victim relatives, some of whom watched her testify.

The car company faces mounting legal troubles, including a Justice Department probe and lawsuits from people injured and families of those who died in crashes allegedly tied to the ignition issue.

Analysts have already speculated that the trouble could cost the company billions of dollars in penalties and damages, on top of huge recall costs.

Lawmakers argued that tragedy could have been avoided if GM acted swiftly to fix a serious but inexpensive problem. "Two dollars. That's how little this ignition switch could have cost to repair," said Senator Ed Markey. "But that was apparently US\$2 too much for General Motors."

Also testifying was acting administrator David Friedman of the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration, the vehicle safety agency under attack for not acting on its own evidence that the ignitions posed risks.



The Chevrolet Cobalt, one of those vehicles involved in a string of accidents because of faulty ignition switches. Image: GM Authority

Crucial data withheld

But Friedman cast blame on GM, saying the company withheld crucial data that would have triggered an in-depth probe years ago. "If they saw a defect, then they needed to report that to us," Friedman said.

"It is important that we get to the bottom of this," said congresswoman Marsha Blackburn. "We want to know who knew what when, and Ms Barra that includes you."

Barra, a lifetime GM employee who only took the company helm in January, said she did not know if any senior executives were aware of the ignition debacle early on or suppressed crucial information.

But "sitting here today, I cannot tell you why it took years for a safety defect to be announced," she said. "When we have answers, we will be fully transparent."

GM has hired lawyer Kenneth Feinberg, who handled the September 11 and BP oil spill compensation cases, to study how it should address victims of the accidents.

"We do understand that we have civic responsibilities as well as legal responsibilities" to make amends for incidents prior to the company's reorganisation, Barra said.

Legally, GM's 2008/09 rescue by the government and bankruptcy reorganisation could shield it from previous liabilities, a scenario that has infuriated some lawmakers.

Since February, GM has recalled 2.4m cars covering model years 2005-2010 over the faulty ignitions, which can abruptly switch into "accessory" or "off" position while in drive, especially when the car is jolted.

That can turn off the car's electrical systems, including safety airbags, preventing them from inflating in a collision.

GM's documentation shows it was first aware of a problem in 2001 when the cars involved were in pre-production.

Source: AFP via I-Net Bridge

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