

<p align="justify"></p><p align="justify">LOS ANGELES, Feb 4 ♦ Pioneering consumer advocate Ralph Nader says the US government's auto-safety watchdog coddled Toyota in dealing with problems leading to a worldwide vehicle recall, and he urged President Barack Obama to strengthen the agency.</p><p align="justify">Nader, who gained prominence in the 1960s as author of the scathing auto industry expose ♦Unsafe at Any Speed,♦ said the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration, or NHTSA, failed to hold Toyota Motor Corp's feet to the fire. </p> ♦The problem here starts not just with Toyota but NHTSA,♦ Nader said in an interview with Reuters on Tuesday, faulting the agency for closing six investigations of complaints about unwanted acceleration in vehicles without finding a defect and for failing to exercise subpoena powers. <p align="justify">And he called Toyota Motor Corp's voluntary recall of some 8 million vehicles worldwide ♦ the largest in its history ♦ for the repair of floor mats and sticky gas pedals ♦ a cheap fix♦ that is ♦too little too late.</p><p align="justify">Like many independent safety experts, Nader said it appears likely that at least some of Toyota's troubles with spontaneous acceleration are rooted in its electronic ♦drive-by-wire♦ throttle systems, though the Japanese automaker has denied the cause is electronic.</p><p align="justify">Nader, 75, who has run several times as a third-party candidate for US president, said Toyota's floor mat entrapment explanation was ♦largely a ruse.</p><p align="justify">He blamed NHTSA for helping Toyota keep its problems with sticking gas pedals out of the public eye for years.</p><p align="justify">♦They have a culture of obeisance where they♦ve become like a consulting firm to the auto companies instead of a regulator and a law enforcement agency,♦ he told Reuters.</p><p align="justify">Combined with what he described as Toyota's fixation on rapid expansion, complacency over its long-held superior safety record ♦and a big problem with transition at the top of the company,♦ Nader said the automaker was primed for disaster.</p><p align="justify">♦It's a Molotov cocktail,♦ he said.</p><p align="justify">But he predicted that Toyota, a company with ♦enormous resources,♦ would ultimately bounce back, and that the issue would refocus much-needed attention on auto safety.</p><p align="justify">♦NHTSA has got to be upgraded now. Obama has to pay more attention to it,♦ Nader said.</p><p align="justify">Asked if NHTSA was sufficiently aggressive, US Transportation Secretary Ray LaHood said Wednesday: ♦I♦ve reviewed what NHTSA did with respect to Toyota and I think NHTSA opened investigations, did their investigations, made recommendations and closed the investigations.</p><p align="justify">Nader, however, said NHTSA is woefully underfunded, with a budget he said has been cut to 55 per cent of its 1980 level in inflation-adjusted dollars, and a staff with 200 fewer people.</p><p align="justify">Moreover, he said NHTSA lacks the expertise to examine issues arising from increasingly complex electronic systems.</p><p align="justify">He also faulted Obama for taking a year to install a new permanent NHTSA administrator, David Strickland, leaving the agency ♦leaderless♦ until recent weeks.</p><p align="justify">According to Nader, sticking gas pedals have been a recurring issue for the auto industry for 40 years. The biggest such problem before now surfaced in 1971, when General Motors recalled 6.1 million cars due to faulty engine mounts found to depress the throttle mechanism. ♦ Reuters</p><p align="justify">
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