

A problem of people, or of railway design?

THE postponement of the Light Rail Transit (LRT) official opening, scheduled for August 8, has thickened the cloud of doubt over the commuter system. The LRT, said to be the answer to the future transport needs of the New Territories, has been plagued by a series of accidents, the latest resulting in the death of an eight-year-old boy. What the inquiry ordered yesterday by the Government must establish urgently is whether there is any fundamental fault in the LRT system.

The Government has reacted quickly in ordering the inquiry, on the basis that any potential threat to public safety must be identified without delay. But there is also a danger in overestimating the threat, as evident in the knee-jerk reactions in some quarters to the fatal accident on Monday. It has already been established that the LRT or its staff were not at fault for several of the previous incidents involving members of the public. However the inquiry must examine whether or not one of the underlying problems is a genuine confusion among drivers and pedestrians in the New Territories about the operation of a transport system to which they are unaccustomed, and which has not been explained effectively to them.

Throughout other areas of Hongkong, in particular the densely populated districts, there are other commuter systems which pose a potential threat to life — trains, trams, buses, taxis and mini-buses. Yet they are not at the centre of controversy, because they are established and familiar. When fatal accidents occur, there is not an immediate query over their safety standards.

If it is found that the people of the New Territories do not understand how the LRT works, it means the public education campaign carried out by the company has been unsuccessful, but that would not imply that the system is intrinsically dangerous.

Some possible inadequacies in the LRT system have already been identified, which is one of the main purposes of running an extensive program of trials. One area of possible improvement is the design of LRT traffic lights, which are green and red, omitting the amber caution signal. No doubt the official inquiry will be asking whether or not that design feature contributed to Monday's tragedy, and to previous incidents in which vehicle drivers have tried to cross junctions at the same time as moving trains. Aware of this

problem, the LRT two weeks ago assigned flag men at busy crossings, only to have its employees detained by the police for illegal traffic patrols. As a remedial measure, the LRT may consider installing the tri-colour system at junctions. Another obvious solution would be to erect boom gates at major crossings.

The parent of the LRT, the Kowloon and Canton Railway Corporation, has long insisted that there is nothing inherently wrong with the new system's mechanisms, which are claimed to be a mixture of the best engineering equipment and technology available. But the single greatest challenge for the LRT is to integrate the system with the traffic pattern in the New Territories. Even though the region is developing rapidly, Tuen Mun, for instance, is a relatively new major housing area. As buildings are erected and roads are laid, traffic signs and stop lights have been installed where none existed before. Rural motorists, still adjusting to the heavier flow of urban traffic, are perhaps baffled by the proliferation of LRT signs and lights crowded together at junctions.

Wherever the fault may be found for the recent spate of accidents, the remedy lies in the hands of the LRT, the Highways Department, the police, and the relevant district boards co-ordinating traffic control in the New Territories, who must explain safety procedures to the public and to their staff in an effective way.

If the inquiry is satisfied that the LRT is sound in concept, the responsibility for making sure it functions in a manner that creates public confidence rests largely with the management, through instilling high standards of safety in their staff and ensuring that maintenance of rolling stock and equipment is faultless.

The scale of investment, and the importance of the LRT network to the development of the New Territories, make it imperative that it is seen to be working well, a task now made more difficult by this unhappy series of incidents during the test period. Satellite municipalities in the area need to be served by an efficient rail network. As more urban dwellers are attracted to the district by its spacious surroundings and affordable housing, the New Territories will be transformed — provided the transport system is satisfying the needs of the people.