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A commendable first step

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The Government's quick response in setting up an investigation into the series of stoppages affecting the Kowloon-Canton Railway Corporation and the promise that the results will be forwarded to the Governor-in-Council for a decision on whether to publish a full explanation or hold a public inquiry, is a commendable first step.

The investigators need to establish quickly whether this is a most unfortunate series of unconnected mishaps, or whether the installation of the system was deficient in some way. If so it is then essential to institute remedial measures immediately.

The electrified line is a vital communications link for the millions now living in the New Territories, for increasing numbers of weekend visitors seeking recreation in our hills and country parks, as for those visiting sporting facilities in Shatin and Taipo. The effect on passenger and freight traffic to and from China is no less important.

Hongkong has made a \$3.5 billion investment in this line with the object of improving and increasing services and we cannot tolerate frequent disruptions of the kind that have affected the line so far. While the delays have different causes it is important to establish why they are happening and whether maintenance and inspection services are adequate.

While the most recent derailment was caused by human error, are the warning systems in trains adequate to ensure that errors like this will not be repeated? Are there additional procedures that need to be instituted or extra devices that ought to be installed? Admittedly some allowance must be made for human intelligence, but in the event of the driver becoming incapacitated is there a device which can operate automatically to prevent a similar mishap?

The KCRC has repeatedly stressed that while delays have occurred, there was no question of the safety of the public being put at risk. So far, so good. The next time there may be people inside the cars, however, and if there is one thing we have come to appreciate in this hi-tech age it is the fallibility of anything made by fallible man.

As for improving communications with the travelling public, that is a separate but no less important issue. The KCRC has an obligation to all who buy tickets to fulfil their commitment to carry the holder between two designated points in the fastest possible time. If it cannot perform this task it has a moral obligation to ensure the public does not suffer undue delay. Prompt advice of any hold-up is essential.