

~~\$20m to replace faulty highway phones~~

By **DOREEN CHEUNG**

THE emergency telephone system on the accident-plagued Tuen Mun highway is irreparably faulty and must be replaced — at an estimated cost of \$20 million.

And it will take at least two years to install a new system, leaving motorists in grave danger from the hundreds of container trailers and fleets of buses which ~~trundle~~ trundle back and forward every day.

Officials who noticed three years ago that the 13-year-old system was faulty have now determined it would be cheaper to scrap it than repair it.

Less than a third of the 64 phones are operative, though accidents are increasingly frequent and more serious as traffic between Tsuen Wan and Tuen Mun builds up.

Casualties in 1989 were 100, although the figure — the only one available — did not distinguish between dead and injured.

This month, however, there have been several accidents, including a bus crash in which 48 schoolchildren were injured and a six-car pile-up in which 10 people were injured.

The trunk road is often paralysed by the crashes because the Police Control Centre cannot be contacted immediately as phones are positioned some distance apart.

The police last year even asked motorists to use their mobile phones to call for help in emergencies.

Legislative Councillors will be asked to approve the \$20 million outlay in the knowledge that the entire system might collapse at any time.

Installed in 1978, the system provides direct voice communication between motorists in distress and the Police Control Centre.

Faults became obvious by the middle of 1989 when the Police Control Centre noted that the number of calls it received dropped dramatically from 531 to 103.

In the year to June, this figure had dropped to only 81 as more phones went out of order.

Technicians found that 42 of the 64 phones were inoperative.

Eight were brought back into service with the replacement of damaged cable but the rest were beyond repair and were dismantled.

Officials estimated that rectifying the faults that were found in the existing system would cost about \$16 million.