

A more explicit statement needed

The announcement by the Director of Marine, Mr Malcolm Alexander, that the details of the investigation into the collision between a hydrofoil, the Flying Albatross, and the ferry Man Tack off Hay Ling Chau on March 2 are not to be made public, cannot pass without comment.

While it takes no special insight to conclude that there were human errors, this was a potentially serious accident involving the sinking of a large ferry carrying 168 people and 11 crew.

Very fortunately there were no casualties though in other circumstances there could have been. But as public safety in Hongkong's territorial waters is involved, as the outlying districts ferries and the hydrofoil services are used by thousands of people each week, and as the lives of many people were put at risk by this collision a full public statement is required at the very least.

There is no reason to doubt that the Director of Marine has made a full inquiry which established that human error "on both sides" was involved.

It may well be that laymen's comments in inquests or inquiries - such as the one into the KMB crash on route TWSK - do not prove to be very profound or helpful and that Marine Department investigators are quite capable of drawing their own expert conclusions.

Reports of the collision, however, threw up a number of points. The hydrofoil's radar was working and the ferry was spotted before the collision - how then did the crash occur? Did it sound any warnings to the ferry? What speed was the hydrofoil travelling at? In view of the density of the fog, was this a safe speed? Are there mandatory speed limits for hydrofoils in foggy weather? If so, were these being observed? If not, is any action being taken both in respect of this collision and in reminding hydrofoil operators of their obligations?

It may be wondered why something as large and as relatively slow as a three-decker ferry could have been hit if adequate precautions had been taken by the hydrofoil master.

Another question raised by passengers on the stricken ferry was the apparent inability to release the liferafts. There was no question that sufficient gear was available, only that it was difficult to get it into the sea, either because the latches could not be undone or because the tilt of the listing vessel prevented it. Does this call for improvements?

These are some of the major points thrown up by reports of the collision.

In a letter to this newspaper the Director of Marine on March 18 declined to comment on the matter because an official inquiry had begun and the matter was "effectively therefore sub judice."

Now however the inquiry has been completed and there is no reason why the Marine Department cannot issue its findings on the cause of the casualty, where the fault lay and how similar types of accidents can be avoided in future.

We accept that there may not have been anything wrong with navigation or radar equipment; that the crews of both ships behaved commendably; that rescue was speedy and effective, that the Police did a good job both at the scene of the collision and afterwards, and that a new harbour surveillance system should help to reduce the possibility of future accidents.

But some more detailed public explanation is needed than Mr Alexander gave at the "Meet the media" session on Thursday.

If this had been a road collision it is almost certain that a charge of at least careless driving would have resulted. It is not, however, a wish to see people prosecuted for their errors that prompts these comments; it is only that the public deserves something more than a few fragmentary remarks tossed off at a press conference, on an accident that could have easily been a serious tragedy.