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Germany Optimistic About Train Technology Despite Setback



China has the only other operating maglev train and was looking to expand its network

After a German maglev train crash last week, industry experts are optimistic that the technology remains attractive to investors, especially those who wish to expand the Transrapid system in China.

While the investigation into the magnetic levitation (maglev) train crash that killed 23 people in Germany on Friday continues, experts are trying to assess the implications for further developing the cutting-edge monorail technology.

Industry leaders and politicians have been trying for decades to build Transrapid routes in Germany and sell more of the technology abroad. Now they wonder whether all plans for the magnetic levitation train itself must be called into question.

The only example of the monorail Transrapid train in commercial use is in China where it whisks passengers from a residential area in Shanghai to the city's Pudong airport at speeds of little under 300 km per hour. China has for years been discussing plans to extend the system to link Shanghai with the city of Hangzhou.

At the weekend, the head of the Shanghai Transrapid project visited the crash site in Germany. Though German media have reported that the Chinese aren't interested in further involvement in the project, only his official report will reveal whether or not the German Transrapid developers, Siemens and ThyssenKrupp, can still hope for lucrative follow-on contracts in China.

ThyssenKrupp chairman Ekkhard Schulz told reporters at the weekend: "I remain convinced that this is a safe form of transport technology."

No technological cause for accident, says minister

In Lower Saxony, the state where the accident took place, Economics Minister Walter Hirche was also confident that last week's accident would only be a temporary setback for the Transrapid technology

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"Naturally, such an accident weighs heavily on any future debate about the Transrapid technology," Hirche said. "But potential buyers will take a thorough look at the causes for this accident and whether it could have been prevented."

"After all," he continued, "we've seen 23 years of testing the technology without any major accident before the disaster on the test track. The ICE high-speed train could not be stopped despite the terrible accident in Eschede, nor will Friday's accident spell the end of the Transrapid."



The accident has been put down to human error

Proposed Munich track still likely to proceed

The southern German city of Munich has also been considering building a Transrapid track between its commercial centre and the airport. Transport Minister Wolfgang Tiefensee has already held talks with the operators of the test track where the accident happened to assess the possible consequences for Munich:

"Industry representatives assured me that such an accident could not have occurred on the planned Munich track," Tiefensee said. "Nevertheless, we'll have an independent expert analyze the details of the accident on the test track and come up with conclusions as to what must be improved when it comes to building the track in Munich."

Bavaria's transport minister Erwin Huber was also keen to put on a brave face. He maintained that security precautions in Munich would be much better.

"The security concept for the track in Munich is on a higher level than that applied on a test track," Huber said. "We're envisaging an integrated security mechanism that incorporates all vehicles on the track, including maintenance cars. Once again, we'll have a more sophisticated safety system in place."



Tiefensee believes the Munich track will go ahead

Mixed feelings for Transrapid in China

Fortunately for the Transrapid operators, most passengers in Shanghai are putting last week's accident in Germany down to human error and are not afraid of anything of this kind happening with the Transrapid trains in commercial use.

"I'm sure that the accident in Germany will have no impact on the future of the Transrapid here in China," said one passenger. "After all, we're not talking about any technical failure of the high speed train itself. I'm in favor of building more such Transrapid tracks in this country."

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However, the Shanghai line has not been without its own problems. On August 11, the train heading to the city's main international airport caught fire after a fault in an electrical storage compartment beneath the passenger cabin. The fire generated large amounts of smoke, but there were no deaths or injuries.

Operational costs for the Transrapid have also been found to be extremely high. The operation in Shanghai, for which Germany provided 10 percent of the \$1 billion budget, is still running at a deficit with no real turnaround in sight. Despite lending cachet to Shanghai's ambitions of becoming a center for regional business, the train has largely been a commercial failure.



Shanghai's maglev caught fire in August

Cut price fares have recently been introduced to attract more customers after passengers complained that they had to travel far from downtown Shanghai to board the train and that its tickets were too expensive. Operator Shanghai Maglev Transport Development Co. had already slashed the ticket prices by one-third soon after its opening after a drop in demand.

So while the latest accident may not mean the end of a technology that German businessmen have been trying so hard to sell, the outlook still remains grim for the Transrapid.

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