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Berlin U-Bahn lessons for Metro

DEBRAJ MITRA

Esplanade: A German railway delegation struck by the volume of commuters who use the Metro suggested after a ride from Esplanade to Masterda Surya Sen station on Wednesday that the transport lifeline should have a much larger fleet and increased frequency of trains.

Andreas Becker, vice-president of the VDB (German Rail Industry Association), said Berlin's Metro network has around 400 trains to cater to a population much smaller than that of Calcutta and its suburbs.

The famous U-Bahn (underground, subway) in Berlin has 10 lines that span a network of around 150km and more than 170 stations. Most lines are underground.

In contrast, Metro Railway currently has 27 rakes in its fleet, of which 23 are functional. The length of the existing north-south line is 27km between New Garia and Noapara.

The 26-member German delegation, which is in India to explore possibilities of collaboration with Indian companies for modernisation and expansion of the railways, had visited Chennai before coming to Calcutta. The team will go to Delhi next.

Becker and other members of the visiting delegation said the snags that often disrupt Metro operations in Calcutta could be avoided through better maintenance.

Of the 23 functioning rakes in the fleet, 13 are air-conditioned. These air-conditioned rakes make 175 of the 300 daily trips in summer. Snags are common —the motors don't work, a door doesn't close or cooling is not uniform.

Two new trains that arrived from the Integral Coach Factory near Chennai several months ago have yet to join the operational fleet because of teething troubles.

Metro officials said a fleet



The German railway delegation on its way to Bansdronei (Masterda Surya Sen) station from Esplanade on Wednesday afternoon. Picture by Sanjoy Chattopadhyaya

smaller than required meant less time for maintenance.

Axel Schuppe, general manager of VDB, said maintenance of trains required constant monitoring for optimal performance. Metro authorities in Germany use "predictive maintenance" to keep their fleets in shape.

"The idea is to be able to anticipate the optimal time for maintenance by identifying possible faults before they

occur," Schuppe said.

Some of the German trains have in-built sensors to collect data from all systems analyse that in real time. There is constant monitoring of all equipment by measuring variables like temperature and vibrations. The pre-emptive process helps identify faults and eliminate them with timely intervention.

Metro rakes in Calcutta undergo a routine periodic

overhaul after it covers a certain distance. The limit is 3-3.5 lakh km for non-AC rakes and 4.5 lakh km for AC ones, an official said.

When the German delegation boarded an air-conditioned rake at Esplanade around 1.30pm, the roof seemed a tad lower than comfortable for a couple of the visitors.

Railway Protection Force personnel had a tough time

keeping curious commuters at bay.

The delegation was led by Christian Storost, head of division at the federal ministry for economic affairs energy. "It was a fun ride. The stations are clean. Overall, I am impressed," he said.

According to Becker, Indian Railway's modernisation plans offer significant opportunities for the German rail industry to partner it.