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Ministry rules out more sub information

By Alan Dron

ATTEMPTS by a military monitoring group to have published more precise information on submarine exercise areas and transit lanes off the West Coast have been rebuffed by the Ministry of Defence.

The Celtic League wants details of the routes made known so fishermen can keep well clear. However, in a letter to the league, the MoD says that submarine transit routes from bases to the open sea must remain secret for reasons of national security.

A further reply rules out requests for submarines to transit busy fishing areas — such as the Firth of Clyde — only on the surface and to scrap exercise areas in the Clyde approaches and north Irish Sea.

The league's assistant secretary, Bernard Moffatt, scorned the national security argument, saying the transit lanes were generally known, with the Soviet Union having stationed intelligence-gathering vessels off Northern Ireland and in the Irish Sea for years in an attempt to track submarines leaving on patrol.

The league is sceptical of the worth of the recently-agreed code of conduct agreed by the Royal Navy and trawlermen in the Firth of Clyde, believing the risks to local mariners' lives will only drop substantially if other submarine-operating nations agree to abide by an international agreement on submarine movements in the area.

It believes several unexplained trawler sinkings and net snaggings in the Irish Sea and its exits may have been caused by Soviet submarines.

It says that its efforts,

through the Irish government, resulted in the International Maritime Organisation issuing a regulation placing the onus on submarines to keep clear of fishing vessels. It now wants to add some teeth to that resolution.

The league, founded in 1963, has some 2,000 members in the six Celtic areas on the north-west fringe of Europe — Scotland, Wales, Ireland, the Isle of Man, Cornwall and Brittany — together with groups in London, the US and Nova Scotia. It has cultural interests, but has also taken an interest — particularly since the early 1980s — in military matters affecting its areas, such as low flying and submarine activities.

Isle of Man-based Mr Moffatt, is blunt over what he regards as shortcomings in the Clyde agreement, hammered out after trawlermen threatened to blockade the Clyde Submarine Base following the loss of the *Antares*. It was dragged down after her nets were fouled by a Royal Navy nuclear submarine.

"The problem is an international one," added Mr Moffatt. This had been demonstrated, he said, by the incident involving the Northern Ireland trawler *Green Eagle*, which reported that its nets were fouled earlier this month.

The US Navy was originally blamed, but the service insisted that although it had a submarine in the area at the time, it had been on the surface, and could not have snagged the nets.

If that was correct, it raised the question of who had been responsible.