

ECOLOGY GROUPS EXPRESS CONCERN ABOUT NUCLEAR SUBMARINE LEAK

As the British nuclear-powered submarine HMS Tireless limped into Gibraltar this morning following a leak in its cooling system, environmental groups in Spain started expressing concern. When told that both Britain and Spain had said there was no risk, a Greenpeace spokesman said that it was normal for the authorities to play down the effects of nuclear accidents.

The group Ecologists in Action cast doubt on the official version, pointing at the submarine having had to make its way to Gibraltar under its diesel-electric propulsion standby system, while environmentalists Agaden and Verdemar expressed alarm.

The leak was first detected about a week ago when the submarine was on a round-the-world deployment, then near Malta.

In Gibraltar the Voice of Gibraltar group said: "We only seem to be here for the problems, like nuclear submarines, that nobody wants." (19 May 2000)

SUBMARINE SAFE, SAYS UK MINISTER

British foreign office minister Keith Vaz, on a visit to Gibraltar today, said the submarine was safe and posed no risks, because the Commander British Forces here had told him so. Shortly thereafter he flew back to London.

"The submarine is safe, the nuclear parts have been shut down," he said whilst in Gibraltar.

Questioned by PANORAMA about his personal or ministerial view about a heavily-populated place like Gibraltar having a nuclear-submarine virtually on its doorsteps, the minister cracked a joke: "Not quite on your doorsteps, I am sure it will remain on the water."

He added: There is no kind of risk. These things do happen.

Political issues

On political issues he repeated that there would be no cession of Gibraltar's sovereignty against the wishes of the people.

He had been shaken by the delays he saw at the Spanish land frontier, saying he would raise this matter with his Spanish opposite number in Madrid next Wednesday. He was reminded that the Foreign Office had been raising the matter with the Spanish for a long time, indeed almost since the frontier was reopened 15 years ago!

For his part the chief minister Peter Caruana felt that more than just representations were required. "I have explained to the minister that sympathy and understanding is not enough. What Gibraltar now needs is effective action."

Mr Caruana added that representations, while welcome, had not achieved anything in getting Spain to operate its border with Gibraltar in a manner compatible with Gibraltar's European Union rights on freedom of movement. (19 May 2000)

BRITISH NUCLEAR SUBMARINE'S REACTOR PROBLEM

A British nuclear-powered submarine has withdrawn from round-the-world deployment and is making its way to Gibraltar with a reactor problem.

The submarine, HMS Tireless, is due to arrive in Gibraltar tomorrow. The possibility

of towing her back from Gibraltar to Britain is being considered by the British military here.

"The defect involved a leak of coolant water from the reactor cooling system," said a British Forces spokesman here today.

The spokesman added: "The leak is contained within the reactor compartment itself and the reactor has been shut down. Radiation levels are normal throughout the submarine. Routine monitoring continues.

The statement adds that there will be no hazard to the general public when the submarine puts into port here tomorrow. There is no hazard either to personnel onboard, say the military. (18 May 2000)

"the visit will allow checks to be carried out on her propulsion system following a defect which has led to her withdrawal from the Naval Task group 2000 round-the-world deployment," the statement said.

It adds: "preparations will also be made for her return to the uk, which will include the possibility of towing should that prove necessary."
(18 May 2000)

Gibraltar's Nuclear Safety treated by UK minister as One Big Joke

Junior foreign office minister Keith Vaz, who is responsible for Gibraltar, treated the serious issue of nuclear safety in Gibraltar as One Big Joke during his brief visit last week, which coincided with the nuclear submarine HMS Tireless limping into port with a fault in its nuclear reactor compartment.

When asked at a press conference about the concern by some sectors in Gibraltar about nuclear submarines, Mr Vaz replied cynically: Are you saying they want more submarines? Given that Gibraltar is a highly populated place, with submarines berthed so close to an urban area, he was asked for his personal or ministerial opinion regarding people having nuclear submarines almost on their doorsteps.

The minister cracked a joke: "Not quite on the doorsteps, I am sure it will remain in the water."

These things happen, he added. "It is here because it is here and that is the end of the matter as far as I am concerned."

SAFETY OF GIBRALTAR

It was not to be the end of the matter. PANORAMA asked him if he had no concern for the safety of the people of Gibraltar.

Mr Vaz kept treating such a serious matter as a joke. "The submarine is not here to coincide with my visit, it is not part of a welcoming party," he quipped.

He went on to say that Gibraltar being in the Mediterranean sea it is understandable why boats are around Gibraltar."

Indeed, there is a long stretch from the mid-Mediterranean, where the leak was discovered, to Gibraltar. Was the submarine offered to nearer places, for example, NATO allies Italy or France? What about taking a faulty nuclear submarine into Malta, or Rota perhaps?

All the minister's attitude does is to infuriate public opinion about nuclear submarines, given the concern there is in Gibraltar about the incidence of cancer and related diseases and the danger that is posed by radiation. Mr Vaz's frivolous, flippant and insulting behaviour must be the last thing the MOD would have welcomed in the face of such a difficult and delicate situation as a nuclear submarine coming here with a fault within its nuclear reactor compartment. This was not a fault well beyond the vicinity of the nuclear reactor, it was the coolant water of the reactor that was the subject of the leak.

SAFE ONE DAY, AND NOT THE NEXT

Mr Vaz said the submarine was perfectly safe, because the Commander British Forces had told him so. Had the CBF been asked about the submarine two weeks ago, when it was also here, his answer would obviously have been that it was an absolutely safe submarine. Yet, a fault developed in the high seas. It could have happened here. Everything is safe, until it is not.

Mr Vaz is supposedly 'Gibraltar's minister in London' who decides to treat nuclear safety in Gibraltar as one big joke. However, at his constituency of Leicester, he is known to treat matters of less importance with the merit they deserve. There, he does not crack jokes affecting the safety of his people. (22.05.00)

British military chief admits Gibraltar unable to repair stricken submarine: Equipment and personnel to be flown to Gibraltar

The Commander British Forces at Gibraltar, Commodore Andrew Willmet, has admitted that the submarine berths at Gibraltar are essentially for recreational use and are not suitable to repair the stricken nuclear submarine HMS Tireless, which limped into Gibraltar over a month ago after developing a leak on the coolant system in its nuclear reactor.

However, the two submarine berths here are "to be upgraded, to ensure that the infrastructure in Gibraltar is brought up to the necessary standard," he said.

The British military here said Friday that the Ministry of Defence had decided to repair the submarine in Gibraltar, rather than tow it back to Britain. Instead, specialist personnel and special equipment is to be flown out to Gibraltar. On operational, safety and timing grounds "the best option was to repair the submarine here", Willmet told Gibraltar radio today.

OPPOSITION CONCERNED

Meanwhile, the Labour/Liberal opposition in Gibraltar today expressed concern that the submarine is to be repaired in Gibraltar. "This represents a major departure in British defence policy from Gibraltar being used only for operational and recreational visits by nuclear submarines to now having a defective submarine undergoing repairs here," said a statement issued by the opposition.

It is logical for the opposition to echo the concern of many people in Gibraltar given the proximity of the submarine to the built-up area, where a minor leak could have immediate serious consequences, the opposition parties added.

While remaining committed to the cause of western defence and the NATO alliance, the opposition says it believes that the submarine should continue its journey to the United Kingdom using its diesel-electric propulsion standby system. "It is shameful that the British government should expect Gibraltar to be at the receiving end of everything that is negative and then not stand up for our rights in Europe and elsewhere," said the statement.

The parties added: "Many people in Gibraltar are completely fed up at Whitehall making use of the Rock only when it suits them in support of wider military activities, or dump on our doorstep a faulty nuclear submarine that nobody seems to want, and then failing to back Gibraltar in other areas. To add insult to injury, it will be recalled that Gibraltar was unceremoniously dumped from the integrated military structure of NATO under Spanish pressure not that long ago."

Gibraltar was ceded to Britain under the Treaty of Utrecht of 1713, but Spain claims the strategically placed territory at the entrance to the Mediterranean. The 30,000 Gibraltarians say they want to remain linked to the United Kingdom.

Gibraltar can not be used for work on "nuclear or associated plant"

Gibraltar is designated a Z berth - berths 49 and 50 to be found on the tip of the South Mole. Almost 2 years ago, at the height of a controversy sparked off by the Voice of Gibraltar group, then led by Yvette del Agua who is now a minister in Caruana's government, the MOD in Gibraltar took the media on a tour of their submarine facilities to try and prove the group wrong.

An official pamphlet handed out at the time by the Commander British Forces declared that Z berths are for "operational and recreational use. NO work on nuclear or associated plant."

A situation has now developed where a nuclear submarine has been at Gibraltar for over a month with a radioactive water leak within the nuclear compartment of the submarine. And it is this leak that is the subject of the planned repairs.

Said the CFB in a statement then: "As to claims that repairs are carried out here to the nuclear power plants on submarines - it's not true."

And he explained further what he meant: "Most people will check the oil and water in the engines of their cars on their driveway but for more demanding work they go to a garage with specialist tools. South Mole is not a garage - it's a driveway; albeit a special one, but we don't work on the engine."

The use of Gibraltar by nuclear submarines for "operational and recreational use" is one thing; to use Gibraltar for such repairs, when it is not a properly staffed and equipped 'garage' for nuclear work, is another.

With the MOD not having explained to the public exactly what is the nature of the work they plan to carry out, people will be asking if the Voice of Gibraltar was right after all...

(26.06.00)

Row over hefty hotel bill for sailors from nuclear submarine

In a new twist to the controversy surrounding the stricken nuclear submarine HMS Tireless, a row has now broken up in Britain over the hefty cost of keeping the submarine's crew in Gibraltar hotels while the Ministry of Defence takes decisions. "The Royal Navy has decided to repair a nuclear submarine in Gibraltar even though it costs around 7,500 pounds a night in hotel bills for the crew, rather than tow the vessel back to Britain," said today's Daily Telegraph.

Repairs could take months so the Navy is sending another ship to provide accommodation for the crew, who have already run up a 270,000 pounds hotel bill since Tireless limped into Gibraltar on May 19.

While the Gibraltar Government remains undecided about public safety if the repairs are carried out, the opposition is objecting to the repairs going ahead on the nuclear reactor compartment of the submarine, Gibraltar being a built-up area with its population close to the submarine.

A Navy spokesman quoted by the Telegraph said that "the original problem that caused radioactive water coolant to leak from the nuclear power plant was serious enough for major engineering work to be necessary."

The Commander British Forces has admitted that the submarine berths here are not suitable for the repairs envisaged, and that specialist staff and equipment needs bringing out from Britain.

Nuclear submarine warning

CND speak of "Serious cause for concern" and "hazardous process" if reactor is started up again in Gib

With the MOD poised to start repair works on the stricken nuclear submarine HMS Tireless, concern is being expressed on two principal grounds:

1. The carrying out of work in the reactor compartment, where the leak of radioactive water took place, "could be a serious cause for concern if they made a mistake during this work," and
2. While the nuclear reactor was shut down when the leak was discovered, if it is started up again in Gibraltar "this process could be hazardous, if there has been a leak somewhere in the coolant system."

This is the view of a CND spokesman John Ainslie with wide experience in Scotland where nuclear submarines abound.

He adds: "In the worst possible case an accident on a nuclear powered submarine could be on the scale of Chernobyl. If all the radioactive material in a submarine reactor was dispersed into the atmosphere this would be on the same scale as the official figures for the releases from Chernobyl. Following a nuclear submarine accident exercise in Scotland in 1997 the Scottish Environmental Protection Agency described such an accident as 'Chernobyl like'" The point is also made that "when there are problems on a nuclear submarine it is very difficult for the general public to know exactly what has gone wrong. The Navy will always play the incident down as much as possible."

Since the Tireless arrived in Gibraltar on May 19 looking rather tired after navigating on its standby non-nuclear propulsion system, the MOD have been stressing that this is a minor problem, with only a very small amount of water having leaked. However, in the same way that the submarine was presumed absolutely safe when it first arrived here on its way into the Mediterranean, a leak did develop when it was between Sicily and the North African coast on May 12.

Says a study by the CND: "There is a serious defect which affects the reactors on nuclear powered submarines in the Royal Navy. The measures which have been taken to adjust to this problem have been inadequate."

Welds joining two different alloys can be weak points, radiation has a detrimental effect, fluctuations in temperature can make the metal more brittle and poor water chemistry in the coolant circuit can contribute to corrosion.

The Clyde Public Safety Scheme states: "A more serious kind of accident would begin with a leak in the primary coolant system brought about for example by pipe failure. As a result of the loss of coolant water the fuel cladding could eventually melt, releasing radioactive fission products into the compartment containing the reactor..."

Says Mr Ainslie: "Even if this incident turns out to be relatively minor it illustrates that if there were to be a major nuclear problem on a British submarine in the Mediterranean, then it would be taken to Gibraltar."

Such an eventuality, and indeed the present repair works, appear to contradict assurances given in the past by the Command British Forces, that Gibraltar is not used for work on nuclear or "associated plant", thus seemingly breaking their own rules and regulations.
(26.06.00)

Gibraltar can not be used for work on "nuclear or associated plant"

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