



Tony and Cherie Blair with the Spanish prime minister, Jose Maria Aznar, in Madrid yesterday Photograph: Santiago Lyon

Blair pledge to Spain on crippled sub

Adela Gooch in Madrid

Tony Blair yesterday announced a special international working group to monitor the condition of a faulty nuclear submarine stranded in Gibraltar.

Trying to calm local fears about the submarine, which has been in Gibraltar since May after a crack was found in its cooling system, he said the submarine was safe, and he promised more transparency, although he ruled out towing it back to Britain.

During a working visit to Spain Mr Blair faced criticism

from the Spanish press for not providing enough information about the submarine.

He said: "We accept full responsibility for safety. This has been very carefully studied, the problem has been identified, there is no risk whatsoever."

He said experts from both countries would meet next week to discuss repairs carried out on the hunter-killer HMS *Tireless*. The navy's most senior adviser on nuclear safety has also flown to Spain.

Assurances by both governments that there is no danger of a radiation leak affecting the

250,000 people in the Gibraltar area have failed to quell disquiet, especially after the Ministry of Defence last week admitted the damage was more serious than first thought and recalled 12 sister submarines.

There were demonstrations outside the British embassy in Madrid yesterday. Concern over the submarine overshadowed Mr Blair's meeting with the Spanish prime minister, Jose Maria Aznar, scheduled to discuss joint European Union initiatives, although they issued a joint statement of confidence in the euro.

Mr Aznar insisted the sub-

marine had not damaged relations with Britain, but earlier this week his foreign minister complained about lack of information on the *Tireless*.

There have been calls for Spanish experts to be allowed to visit the submarine. Up to now they have been briefed by the Royal Navy but not allowed to see for themselves.

Mr Blair said the issue of access by technicians "would be discussed". That may anger Gibraltar, always wary of Spanish attempts to claim sovereignty over the Rock.