

Muddying the waters 5/18/12/93

IT is just over two years since the trawler Antares was sunk by a Royal Navy nuclear submarine in the Clyde with the loss of four lives. Since then much thought has gone into devising ways of preventing similar tragedies. The only sure way would be a total ban on submarine exercises in the crowded waters of the Clyde, a peace dividend in a most acceptable form. The Ministry of Defence sees things differently. It has cut these operations by a third but is unwilling to end them, so the focus of attention has been on drawing up stricter safety measures. One of the most sensible suggestions was made in the Department of Transport's Antares report in July, which recommended an extension of the notification scheme already in force in the Clyde to other areas in order to give at least four hours' warning of activity in all UK submarine exercise grounds.

But now this "essential" safety measure is being challenged from within the Department of Transport itself. Britain's chief coastguard officer, Commander Derek Ancona, whose service is part of the department, is not only refusing to extend the service in line with the department's guidelines but is even threatening to stop broadcasting submarine warnings to fishermen in all UK waters, the Clyde included. He claims that the system ties up radio frequencies for an excessive amount of time and could thus interfere with search and rescue operations. If this is the case, the problem

should have been aired at the time the department was issuing its guidelines. Its emergence at this stage, two years after the scheme was set up, must carry a suggestion of bureaucratic in-fighting.

Whatever the grounds for Commander Ancona's criticisms — and they must be judged on their merits — his own proposed solution to the problem is unsatisfactory. There is already, he argues, an accepted navigational warning system to which fishermen must be prepared to listen, and "that apart, the onus is on submarines to keep out of the way of fishing vessels". From these remarks it might seem as if the Antares tragedy had never occurred. The whole point of introducing new guidelines was that the previous system was inadequate. The sinking of the Antares was no freak event; it is thought possible that more than a dozen similar accidents have occurred over the past decade in the Clyde and the Irish Sea. The new warning system is more workable than Commander Ancona's "accepted" navigational warning system because the submarine information is given at the same time as weather reports, and thus avoids the need for continuous listening — which, whatever the theory, is obviously hard to manage in small vessels with three-man crews. Commander Ancona insists that he is not running a broadcasting system. "My primary function is search and rescue," he adds. Less broadcasting, alas, might mean more search and rescue.