

Scottish CND      News

## **Nuclear submarine threat to Gibraltar and surrounding areas**

There was a reactor leak on a British submarine in the Mediterranean. The vessel is now in Gibraltar and the Navy intend to repair the reactor there. At the moment they are not permitted to do this. They are seeking to upgrade the status of the berth to carry out a reactor repair. An accident during the repair could be catastrophic. Even the Navy's own limited plans for coping with an accident would be impossible to implement. The proposal to repair the submarine in Gibraltar must be rejected.

Background

Nuclear Hazard

Issues

Map of Gibraltar 550 m and 2 km safety zones

Map of area showing proximity of Spanish towns

## **Background**

### **Leak from nuclear reactor**

On 12th May the nuclear powered submarine HMS Tireless was in the Mediterranean between Sicily and North Africa when an incident occurred in the reactor compartment. Precise details have not been made public. Captain Dis Carney of the Royal Navy said there had been "a leak of coolant water from the reactor". It was later disclosed that some coolant had been discharged into the Mediterranean after the incident. The submarine was taking part in Naval Task group 2000, a round the world deployment, from which it has since been withdrawn.

### **Where will it be repaired ?**

The submarine arrived in Gibraltar by 19th May. The vessel used auxiliary power to carry out the journey. At the time Captain Dis Carney said that HMS Tireless "is undergoing work to ensure that she's in shape to sail to Britain" for further repairs. This indicated that the submarine would only be in Gibraltar for a short time and then it would go to Devonport for repair, travelling there either using auxiliary power or under tow.

On 26th June Commodore Andrew Willmet, Commander British Forces (CBF) Gibraltar announced that there had been a change of plan and that the submarine would now be repaired in Gibraltar. There has been no explanation for this change. All he would say was that the decision had been made on operational, safety and timing grounds. A support vessel, special personnel and equipment are being sent to carry out the repair on the nuclear reactor.

### **Move to upgrade berth status**

The submarine berth at Gibraltar is currently designated as a "Z berth". In 1998 the CBF Gibraltar said that the berth was for "operational and recreation use" and that "no work on nuclear or associated plant" would be carried out. The Voice of Gibraltar group at the time raised concerns that reactor work might be carried out and were told by the CBF "As to claims

raised concerns that reactor work might be carried out and were told by the CBF "As to claims that repairs are carried out here to the nuclear power plants on submarines -it's not true. ... 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 Clyde Public Safety Scheme, produced by the Royal Navy, also makes it clear that reactor repairs should not be done at a Z berth. It says that "Z berths are cleared for operational or recreational visits by nuclear powered warships. These berths are not cleared for the maintenance or repair of the nuclear plant."

This means that, as it currently stands, the reactor repair cannot be carried out in Gibraltar. On 26th June the CBF said that the Ministry of Defence would be seeking to upgrade the facility from a Z berth to an X berth.

An X berth has been described as follows:

"An X berth is a berth designated for frequent and regular use by nuclear-powered warships, or a berth in a dockyard or naval base which is suitable for the building, refit, repair or maintenance of nuclear-powered warships. All X berths have as an integral part of their safety arrangements a permanent health physics department, a local emergency monitoring organisation and a local safety plan prepared under the auspices of a local liaison committee." (Archie Hamilton MP, Armed Forces Minister, House of Commons, 5 May 1989)

The only X berths in Britain are the nuclear submarine refit facilities at Rosyth and Devonport, the submarine bases at Faslane and Devonport and the construction yard at Barrow in Furness.

### **Local Response**

When the submarine arrived in May a number of local groups expressed concern. Voice of Gibraltar said "We only seem to be here for the problems, like nuclear submarines, that nobody wants."

When the decision to repair Tireless in Gibraltar was announced the Labour/Liberal opposition in Gibraltar said "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. 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. 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."

### **Visit by Junior Foreign Office Minister**

Keith Vaz MP, Junior Minister at the Foreign Office gave a flippant response when he was asked about Tireless by local journalists during a recent visit to Gibraltar. They asked why the vessel was on their doorsteps and he replied "Not quite on the doorsteps, I am sure it will remain in the water ." He added, "It is here because it is here and that is the end of the matter as far as I am concerned."

### **Nuclear accident hazard**

A nuclear accident involving the reactor on HMS Tireless could have very far reaching

A nuclear accident involving the reactor on HMS Tireless could have very far reaching consequences. Following an accident exercise at the Faslane base in 1997, one of the participants, the Scottish Environmental Protection Agency, described the consequences as "Chernobyl-like".

The Navy has some plans for responding to an accident at Faslane on the Clyde. Scottish CND regard them as seriously flawed and inadequate. Nevertheless, even these limited measures could not seriously be applied in Gibraltar. The following points emerge from trying to apply the Clyde Public Safety Scheme principles to Gibraltar:

### **1. Prior warning to those within 550 metres (Gibraltar)**

Everyone who lives or works within 550 metres of where the submarine is moored should be given a booklet which details what they should do in the event of a nuclear accident. In the case of Gibraltar the Queensway Quay Marina which has berths for 121 vessels falls within this area. Large parts of the centre of the town are only just further than this.

### **2. Detailed plans for those within 2 kilometres (Gibraltar)**

Within 2 kilometres of the berth there should be a pre-planned countermeasures zone. The Navy considers that the measures which might have to be applied in the event of an accident are primarily the rapid distribution of Potassium Iodate Tablets (PITs) and issuing advice to take shelter. After the Chernobyl accident large numbers of children in Belarus and the Ukraine have developed thyroid problems. This can be prevented if PITs are issued. They have to be taken within the first hour or two, and the sooner they are taken the more effective they are. The risk of thyroid cancer and the effectiveness of PITs are both greater for the youngest members of the population.

Almost all of the occupied areas of Gibraltar and the main tourist attractions are within 2 kms of the submarine berth. It is very hard to imagine how any plan could be drawn up for the distribution of tablets to all those within 2 kms downwind immediately after an accident. There would also be language and practical difficulties involved in trying to effectively advise everyone to take shelter.

There should also be outline contingency plans for evacuating those within 2 kms downwind of the submarine in the event of an accident. The geography of Gibraltar would make it very difficult to carry out an evacuation, particularly if the one land exit to the North was within the contaminated area.

Almost all the tourist attractions in Gibraltar would fall within this zone. The Grand Parade and Cable Car station are 800 metres from the submarine. Many of the tourist attractions in the centre of the town are less than 1000 metres from HMS Tireless. The nature reserve is 1,500 metres from the berth. The cruise liner terminal is 1.5 kms from the submarine. Last year 140 cruise ships visited with 85,000 passengers.

In 1996 there were 6 million tourists who visited Gibraltar, most of them day visitors. The total land area is 6.5 square kilometres. The local population in July 1999 was 29,165 of whom 5,878 are under 14 years of age.

[Map of 550 m and 2 km safety zones applied to Gibraltar](#)

### **3. Provision for those within 10 kms (Spain)**

With regard to nuclear submarine berths on the Clyde the Ministry of Defence "advises local

With regard to nuclear submarine berths on the Clyde the Ministry of Defence "advises local planners to consider the production of outline contingency plans .. to provide the basis for the further extension of countermeasures". The measures referred to include the distribution of Potassium Iodate Tablets and giving advice to take shelter. For the Clyde berths this zone extends out to 10 kms.

Within 10 kms there are substantial towns in Spain. La Linea de la Concepcion has a population of 59,879 and is only 3 kms from the nuclear submarine berth. Algeciras is 7 kms across the bay and has a population of 102,058. San Roque is around 7 kms away and has a population of 22,435.

Area map showing proximity of Spanish towns

### **Water supplies and nuclear waste**

There is local concern that the repair work could result in radioactive contamination of the local water supply. The input to the desalination plant for the water supply is within the harbour area, 1,800 metres from the submarine berth. The Navy have already admitted that coolant was discharged into the Mediterranean earlier in this incident, so there is a real danger that this could happen again. In addition to the real risks of radioactive contamination to the water supply, even minimal contamination would be catastrophic for the tourist industry.

Carrying out any work within the reactor compartment will produce nuclear waste. There will certainly be low level waste. Depending on the nature of the repair it is also likely that there will be some intermediate level nuclear waste. Existing X berths in the UK have special facilities for storing this and arrangements for managing it. So far the Ministry of Defence has given no indication of how this nuclear waste could be handled at Gibraltar. In Scotland the Scottish Parliament has some control over nuclear discharges. Who has power over nuclear waste issues at Gibraltar ?

### **Issues**

#### **Citizens of Gibraltar**

There are grounds for suspecting that the people of Gibraltar are being regarded as a "soft touch". The Ministry of Defence is assuming that they will loyally accept the risks arising from having a dangerous nuclear powered submarine repaired in their midst, without complaint.

The public must be able to scutinise any nuclear safety plan which is being considered. It is hard to imagine how a feasible plan could be drawn up and it is hard to escape the conclusion that the proposal from the Ministry of Defence to repair HMS Tireless in Gibraltar should be rejected on safety grounds.

#### **The tourist industry**

Information about this problem is already in the public domain and in time more details are likely to emerge. If this issue is drawn out over the months ahead, then more and more people will question whether visiting the area is too risky. No-one wants to go on holiday beside the next Chernobyl. Trying to pretend that there is no hazard would not be in the best long term interests of the tourist industry in Gibraltar and Andalusia. It would be far more effective to draw the matter to a rapid close by rejecting the plan to repair the submarine where it is.

### **Tourists**

Tourists planning to visit the area have a great deal of power over what happens. If you are concerned about the potential risk to this unique area, make your views known to tour operators and the local authorities.

## **Spain**

There are particular aspect of this issue which affect the relationship between Britain and Spain over Gibraltar. This must be the only place in the world where there is a nuclear facility within 3 kms of an international border. Chernobyl showed that radiation shows no respect for frontiers. Those living in and visiting La Linea, Algecira and San Roque are potential victims of a situation over which they would appear to have no control. Upgrading the status of the submarine facility to an X berth is unlikely to be well received in Spain. This will do nothing to improve future relations between Gibraltar and neighbouring areas of Spain.

Updates on the situation in Gibraltar are available at:

[www.iberianews.com](http://www.iberianews.com) and [www.panorama.gi](http://www.panorama.gi)

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For further information email [Scottish CND](mailto:Scottish CND)