

# Labour will press for details on nuclear subs' problems



Martin O'Neill: concerned at 'strange movements'

By Severin Carroll

LABOUR is to press the Government to reveal the nature of the problems affecting Britain's Polaris submarine fleet today after increasingly erratic patrol patterns which have deepened fears over the fleet's safety.

The opposition defence spokesman, Martin O'Neill, is to question defence ministers during the Commons annual debate on the Royal Navy tonight after a series of reports alleging that the nuclear submarine fleet is crippled by reactor defects.

It has emerged that one of the two remaining Polaris sub-

marines available for patrols, HMS Resolution, returned to patrol duties earlier this month after only one week at Faslane submarine base, being immediately reloaded with supplies and having its reactor coolant changed.

According to Greenpeace researchers, Resolution had just completed a regular four-month patrol and was expected to stay at the Clyde base for several months while a second vessel took up patrol duties.

But the second submarine available, HMS Revenge, was absent from Faslane for only two weeks before reappearing on the Clyde earlier this

month. Revenge travelled to a Royal Navy testing range off Loch Lomond, and returned to Faslane 24 hours later, Greenpeace says.

Concerns over the condition of both submarines have focused on potentially dangerous cracks in the nuclear reactors and cooling systems of several Polaris submarines and another class of submarines carrying the same reactor — three of which have since been withdrawn.

Two other Polaris submarines have remained unused, HMS Remown is being refitted at Rosyth — overrunning its 22-month refit schedule by nearly two years.

The fourth, HMS Repulse, has remained at Faslane for 12 months and is believed to be undergoing repairs after failing to win an essential operations certificate.

The delays at Rosyth and the problems affecting the Repulse have forced Revenge to remain on active service for a record-breaking nine years since its last refit. It was to be refitted and have its reactor replaced in 1989.

Recent reports say Polaris reactors have regularly to be refuelled to avoid the delicate system becoming blocked up with "ashes" from decaying fuel rods. Concerns have increased that Revenge's

nuclear reactor is reaching the limit of its capability.

Last night, Mr O'Neill said he was unable to speculate on the causes of the delays. He said the deep secrecy maintained by the Government and Ministry of Defence made it impossible to gain information on the situation, but added that he will repeat his demands tonight that the Defence Secretary, Tom King, provide information on the fleet's status.

"This information suggests that the navy is encountering several difficulties with the present craft and we will be pressing the minister in the navy debate to disclose the reasons for these strange movements. Normally you would expect the boat to have been in port for far, far longer after a 16-week tour."

Janet Convery, a Greenpeace campaigner, said that erratic patrols suggested that only one submarine from the four-strong fleet was fully available for operations.

A Ministry of Defence spokesman restated the Government's refusal to discuss individual Polaris submarines. "Continuous Polaris deterrence patrols are maintained in accordance with our policy to have at least one such boat at sea at all times," he said.

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