

30/10/00

## Stricken sub row mars Blair visit to Spain

PRIME Minister Tony Blair flew into Spain yesterday for a mini-summit which risked being overshadowed by a diplomatic row over the crippled British nuclear powered submarine HMS Tireless, currently being repaired in Gibraltar.

The fate of the submarine dominated local news reports of Mr Blair's visit, which he had hoped would focus on EU reform and economic issues.

Mr Blair, accompanied by wife Cherie and baby son Leo, visited a school in Madrid before going on to have talks with local business leaders and his Spanish counterpart, Jose Maria Aznar.

The Spanish premier was expected to press Mr Blair for reassurances that the presence of the stricken sub poses no threat to public safety in Gibraltar or southern Spain.

A welding crack in the cooling system surrounding the vessel's nuclear reactor was discovered to be more serious than at first thought, leading to Britain's entire nuclear-powered hunter-killer submarine flotilla being removed from service.

The disclosure has awakened fears for public safety in Gibraltar and the surrounding area. The issue also gives the Spanish Government the opportunity to put the thorny issue of Gibraltar's sovereignty on the table.

Pressure groups in Spain and Gibraltar have demanded the sub's return to the UK, and permission for Spanish experts to board her and inspect the damage for themselves. Britain has refused both requests so far, but Royal Navy experts have assured authorities in Gibraltar and Madrid that the vessel is safe.