

Sub's reactor leak raises doubts over rest of fleet

Gibraltar calls in British expert on nuclear safety after Royal Navy refuse to move stricken vessel



On May 12, HMS Tireless, one of seven Royal Navy Trafalgar class nuclear-powered submarines suffered a coolant leak in its reactor circuit while on exercise in the Mediterranean.

Using auxiliary power, the crippled ship sailed into Gibraltar, where the Royal Navy intends to repair it. However, two weeks ago hundreds of Gibraltarians marched in protest at the sub's presence. Concerns have since been raised over how few Navy submarines now appear to be operational.

By **Stephen Haysmith** *Special*
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THE safety of Britain's nuclear submarines has been called into question after reports that only two out of the Royal Navy's 12 Hunter-Killer subs are currently in active service.

Now activists from the Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament are demanding to know the status of the Swiftsure class HMS Superb, which is currently docked at the Clyde submarine base, Faslane and appears to be undergoing work on its reactor.

Concern over the state of the subs has grown since May, when a faulty weld led to a coolant leak in HMS Tireless's reactor. Experts have warned that the accident could have been catastrophic and say it throws the safety testing of all Britain's fleet into doubt.

Meanwhile, a row over the planned repair of HMS Tireless in Gibraltar is set to escalate this week when an independent British nuclear industry expert will fly out to advise the Gibraltarian government on the risk posed by repair.

The Royal Navy has said that the stricken sub cannot be brought back to the UK for repairs. However, following public demonstrations in Gibraltar, chief minister Peter Caruana has asked John Large, a nuclear consultant based in London, to undertake an independent safety assessment.

Last night, a spokesman for the chief minister said that the Ministry of Defence had to jump through two "hoops" if repairs were to take place in Gibraltar. "They have to convince the government that repairs will be safe. Secondly, they have to convince public opinion."

Large said that if he was engaged by the government there, he would advise them on the exact nature of repairs and the risk involved. He added, however, that the Navy's insistence that repairs need to be carried out in Gibraltar suggests the accident may be more serious than has previously been admitted.

It has been reported that the Navy fears HMS Tireless would run out of diesel if it tried to reach facilities in the UK under its own steam. The risk of rough weather has also been cited as a reason for keeping it in Gibraltar. However, Large said: "I am suspicious

about why the submarine can't come back under tow. Rough weather and running out of diesel are not very plausible reasons. It may be that the loss of coolant was more serious than they admitted."

The leak, continued Large, must raise questions about the rest of the fleet. "If there was a big loss of coolant, the hull could be compromised. We don't know if the faulty weld was original or one that had been redone during HMS Tireless's recent refit."

"A weld is incredibly critical. If you have a weld failure on a reactor it is critical. The welds are scrupulously X-rayed through, then there is a likelihood that Major repairs to a submarine would not normally take place without first removing its fuel, which would be impossible in Gibraltar's limited facilities. Large said. But repairing the reactor without doing this increases the risk.

In the worst case scenario, he warned, an accident would be comparable to another Chernobyl disaster, but the risks would be higher due to the richer fuel used by the Navy. "The Chernobyl reactor was 800 megawatts. A Navy reactor is 900 megawatts. If a civilian Cambridge reactor is compared to an Austin Cambridge, these things are like E-types."

John Ainslie, from Scottish CND, says no submarines should be at sea as the Navy did not yet appear to be clear about what happened to HMS Tireless. "The safety case for all submarines has been affected by this accident," he said.

"There are signs that the problem is affecting other submarine operations. The Navy has admitted that only one, HMS Triumph, of the seven Trafalgar class submarines is operational at the moment. Of the five Swiftsure class, only one is at sea. On Wednesday, three Tridentes were in Faslane, the fourth will be on patrol. The Navy has admitted it doesn't know what caused the problem, but the system for carrying out inspections and analysing the results appears to have failed."

All the Swiftsure and Trafalgar nuclear submarines should be recalled, he said, but the Trident fleet must also be considered compromised. "Although the

Trident fleet has never been into a refit, there would have been similar checks on welds during construction at Barrow," Ainslie added that the situation regarding HMS Superb requires particular clarification. "The reactor firm, Rolls Royce and Associates, are working on it in force. This is an appropriate concern for the Scottish parliament as it has jurisdiction over emergency planning.

If there is a higher risk of an accident involving a nuclear submarine at Faslane or in Scottish waters, this affects the plans which are required to respond to an incident."

A spokesman for the Royal Navy said CND were wrong to suggest that only two of the Hunter-Killer submarines were operational. "Many are in dock for scheduled routine maintenance or leave for their crews," he said. "We wouldn't say how many are ready for instantaneous use."

He also denied HMS Tireless had had an "accident" and said the implications of the coolant leak for other submarines in the fleet had been assessed. "All the submarines have been considered in the light of the defect found in Tireless. With the exception of Tireless, the remaining submarines are safe to operate."

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Children of pre-teen



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