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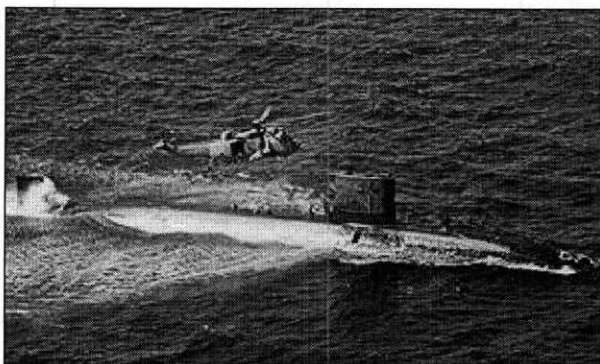
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Nuclear subs 'out for months'



The submarines could be in dock for months

The UK's entire fleet of nuclear-powered hunter-killer submarines could be out of service until next year because of safety fears.

► The BBC's Daniel Sandford

"Some of the Navy's most potent weapons will soon be lying idle"

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► Armed Forces Minister, John Spellar

"We are dealing with this in a very safety conscious way"

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► Defence expert John Large

"All these boats have to come back to the very limited facilities we have in the UK."

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The withdrawal of the 12-strong fleet has been called a "desperate situation" and "an embarrassment" by opposition parties.

It was triggered by a detailed inspection of HMS Tireless, a Trafalgar class boat, which docked in Gibraltar in May with a leak in the pipework running into its nuclear reactor.

The Ministry of Defence maintains that the fault will not seriously affect the Royal Navy's nuclear capability.

Only two nuclear hunter-killer submarines are currently on operations overseas, and they are expected back in the UK within the next two or three days.



The first thing I want to do is to reassure people regarding the safety of these submarines



John Spellar, armed forces minister

All the others are either already undergoing refits or were ordered to stay in port in the UK while the problem was assessed.

It could be a long time before the fleet of Trafalgar and Swiftsure class vessels are back to normal operating strength, according to expert John Large.

"Now they have withdrawn the rest of the

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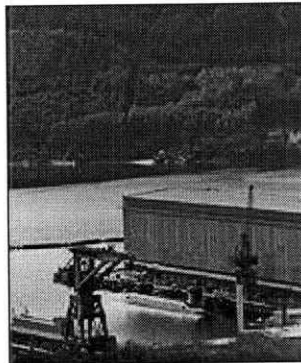
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flotilla it looks as though it was a generic defect with a particular weld on the reactor surface and that will take some months to repair," he told BBC Radio 4's Today programme.

"The implications here are that all these boats have to come back to the very limited facilities we have in the UK, just two dockyards, and that [it] will take some time to get the flotilla fully back to sea."

Britain's four Trident submarines, armed with strategic nuclear missiles, are unaffected by the safety concerns but will be left without the protective cover normally provided by the recalled vessels.



Some of the submarines are based at the Clyde naval base

Armed forces minister John Spellar said he could not say how long the huge repair programme would take to complete.

"The first thing I want to do is to reassure people regarding the safety of these submarines," he told Today.

"We had very minor leaks on HMS Tireless. There weren't leaks on the other ships, otherwise we would have detected that earlier.

"But once we thought there was the possibility of a generic fault across the fleet in the cooling system, inevitably, especially where ships were already being re-fitted and repaired, we started to look at them.

"Once we found out that there was probably a systematic problem the only sensible and prudent thing was then to look at all the others."

The cracks were originally estimated at about two millimetres but were subsequently found to be a few centimetres long, he said.

Serious questions need to be asked as to why the government has taken so long to make a decision about this

According to John Large, who has been advising the authorities

Iain Duncan Smith

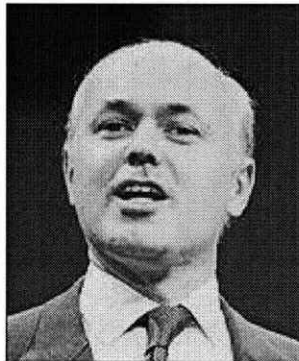
in Gibraltar on the safety implications of HMS Tireless's problems, the risk the problem poses on a shut down reactor is negligible.

But on vessels at sea it could trigger a "catastrophic failure" in the reactor followed by a radioactive leak.

Shadow defence secretary Iain Duncan Smith said although the decision was necessary, the withdrawal of the submarines left a "severe hole" in Britain's defensive capabilities

"This is a desperate situation to be in.

"Serious questions need to be asked as to why the government has taken so long to make a decision about this when the faults were discovered in May."



Iain Duncan-Smith asked if cost-cutting could be to blame

Liberal Democrat defence spokesman Menzies Campbell said: "This is a matter of very considerable embarrassment for the United Kingdom.

"It raises questions of both capability and credibility."

Both types of submarine carry the Tomahawk cruise missile used to attack land-based targets, but their main role is to search out and destroy enemy vessels.

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