

# Six nuclear-powered submarines show signs of reactor defects

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Six of the Royal Navy's fleet of 12 hunter-killer submarines are showing signs of the same flaw in the coolant system that crippled HMS Tireless, which is under repair in Gibraltar.

The whole fleet was withdrawn from service last month because of a suspected flaw in their nuclear reactors. Geoff Hoon, the defence secretary, said yesterday that only one of the submarines had been cleared to return to service.

Four submarines - the Sceptre, Spartan, Trenchant and Sovereign - have been

cleared of having the flaw but are undergoing refits and so cannot go to sea.

The Triumph, the navy's newest attack submarine launched in 1991, is the only vessel able to resume duties including protection of Trident submarines carrying nuclear weapons. The Triumph carries Tomahawk cruise missiles.

The fleet was ordered into port when investigations on the Tireless indicated that a tiny leak, which had been thought to be a problem with welding, could be evidence of a design problem.

The six vessels showing signs of the flaw - the Superb, Splendid, Trafalgar,

Turbulent, Torbay and Talent - will undergo more detailed inspections that should be completed by late November, when repair decisions will be taken.

Separately, Mr Hoon announced a halt to competition between Rolls-Royce and General Electric of the US to supply engines for the navy's Type 45 destroyers.

Instead, the navy will negotiate only with Rolls-Royce, working in partnership with Northrop Grumman of the US, on the supply of the WR-21 gas turbine engine, developed under a £300m programme funded by the US, British and French governments.

The decision is a breakthrough for the new engine.

The MoD said the WR-21 would be more expensive than the GE offering, but it decided to go with Rolls-Royce because of "wider issues" including the possibility that the WR-21 could power future UK aircraft-carriers and frigates.

The decision will support 1,000 UK jobs, although the engines will be assembled by Northrop in the US.

● The MoD has invited three companies, Computing Devices of Canada, Thomson Racal Defence and TRW, to bid to be prime contractor for the delayed £1.7bn Bowman army radio contract.