

MP is to demand Polaris inquiry after fault claims

By IAIN GRAY and KEN SMITH

A SCOTTS MP is to urge the Defence Select Committee to investigate fully the state of Britain's Polaris submarine fleet after suggestions that it can no longer fulfil its role of always having one boat on patrol.

It is believed that at the weekend, for the first time since Polaris became Britain's nuclear deterrent in 1968, there were no Polaris submarines at sea.

The problem is alleged to have been caused by faults in the nuclear reactors of the submarines.

Anti-nuclear campaigners Greenpeace claim that nearly half of the Royal Navy's 18-strong nuclear submarine fleet have a design fault which could lead to a core meltdown.

In a report commissioned for Greenpeace, nuclear engineer Mr John Large claims eight submarines are affected and include all four of Britain's Polaris fleet — Resolution, Repulse, Renown, and Revenge. Resolution is currently in base at Faslane, after being shadowed by Greenpeace activists on the Clyde on Tuesday. The Ministry of Defence

insists that a Polaris submarine is on patrol. However, Dumbarroon MP Mr John McFall, whose constituency includes the Clyde Submarine Base at Faslane, says this is not the complete picture.

As a member of the Defence Select Committee, he will be asking the committee, when it meets next Wednesday, to take a fresh look at the state of preparedness of the Polaris fleet.

The picture appears to be that HMS Renown is at Rosyth where it has been undergoing a major refit for two years.

Mr McFall believes, however, that HMS Repulse has accomplished only one tour of duty in the past two years because of reactor problems.

Resolution has returned to the Gareloch after 16 weeks on patrol — twice as long as usual.

As the Royal Navy suggests, HMS Revenge has now sailed. But as Mr McFall points out, due to sea trials at the start of a patrol, it will be a week before Revenge is on station, probably within the Arctic Circle.

If that is the case, then it means that, while the

Navy is technically correct in saying that a Polaris submarine is at sea, it is not on station, according to Mr McFall.

He said yesterday: "The declared objective of having one Polaris submarine on station does not appear to be being met, and I will be asking the Select Committee to investigate further."

Meanwhile, Mr Large said his study had found that the eight submarines involved suffer from the same design fault which led to the premature decommissioning in September of HMS Conqueror, Warspite, and Churchill.

The fault — cracks in the nuclear reactor primary coolant circuit — could lead to loss of coolant, followed by core meltdown, loss of the submarine, and radioactive contamination, he claimed.

Greenpeace spokeswoman Janet Convery said: "These nuclear submarines are highly dangerous and should not be going anywhere. It is irresponsible of the Ministry of Defence to allow these vessels to go to sea when there is a risk of core meltdown."



Picture: PHIL RIDER

The watchers . . . Ministry of Defence police keep a close eye on a Greenpeace launch as it sails towards Faslane.

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