

Conqueror axed in £600m cuts

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HMS Conqueror, the nuclear submarine which sank the Argentinian cruiser Belgrano, and an expensive but unsuccessful seabed operations vessel, HMS Challenger, are among nine warships the Royal Navy is disposing of to help balance the defence budget.

Conqueror will be stripped of her propulsion reactor and laid up, like the prototype nuclear submarine HMS Dreadnought, until some politically acceptable method of dumping radioactive waste is found.

Challenger will be sold to a private buyer — if one can be found, after her many technical problems — to recover some of her £150 million cost.

The disposal of warships, first reported in the Guardian on July 23, is the navy's main contribution to a £600 million economy package put together by the Ministry of Defence to compensate for higher than forecast inflation. The naval element amounts to £170 million.

The other ships to go, all elderly and expensive to refit and man, are the frigate HMS Phoebe, two Oberon class diesel submarines Onslaught and Odin, minehunters Gavinton and Kirkliston (already in reserve), and two patrol craft, Sandpiper and Peterel.

The main RAF item is the cancellation of 33 Tornado multi-role combat aircraft, saving about £60 million this year. A large number of small equip-

ment deferrals and cancellations will bring the RAF share to £200 million.

The army will limit recruitment this year to 16,000 — 4,000 less than planned — and will make up its £160 million contribution by buying less ammunition and other equipment, and abandoning works in Germany.

These measures reflect the future shape and size of the armed forces after the Defence Secretary's Options for Change defence policy review — for instance a smaller army and the closure of two RAF bases in Germany. Cancelling the last batch of Tornados makes room for the European Fighter Aircraft.

The decision to scrap HMS Conqueror has nothing to do with her controversial record in the Falklands, when she became the first nuclear-powered submarine to fire in anger.

She is one of the five 1960s boats that have undergone emergency inspections following the discovery of cracks in HMS Warspite's reactor, and repairing similar damage might have been part of the expensive "routine maintenance" that has persuaded the navy to get rid of her.

HMS Challenger was launched in 1981 as a mother ship for deep saturation diving. After many modifications, and trials costing £8 million, the last of these systems is still not fully operational. Even Jane's Fighting Ships says the vessel has proved poor value for money.

The navy says it has other means of rescuing submarines, and could hire back Challenger.

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