

France recalls nuclear subs as blast kills 10

Paul Webster in Paris

THREE nuclear-powered submarines on patrol in the Mediterranean and the Atlantic were recalled by the French navy yesterday after an explosion on another nuclear sub killed 10 sailors, including the commander.

The blast — caused by a leak of superheated steam — occurred while the 2,670-tonne *Emeraude* was underwater on exercises off holiday beaches near Toulon but the submarine,

which carried conventional torpedoes and missiles, limped back on surface into the naval port under emergency power.

Military sources said the vessel was taking part in training exercises with surface ships between Toulon and Corsica.

The explosion occurred in a compartment containing the steam turbine, which supplies electricity to the vessel.

A leak in a pipe "filled the turbo-generating room with steam," burning the victims or asphyxiating them, said Rear Admiral Philippe Roy. A navy spokesman said the nuclear power unit was unaffected: "The nuclear power source is completely sealed off and there was no question of any leakage into the Mediterranean."

The 10 dead, members of a crew that normally numbers 66, were all working in the steam

turbine compartment and no other area of the boat was seriously damaged, the navy said.

But despite reassurances over the safety of the other five similar nuclear-propelled submarines in service with the French navy, three were immediately summoned back for inspection. Adm Roy said: "We are calling them back ... because we are asking questions about what happened."

The *Emeraude*, which was launched in 1988, is one of six Rubis-class attack submarines, designed to hunt down enemy ships. France also operates nuclear missile launching submarines of a different design.

Last July the bow of a Rubis-class submarine was seriously damaged when it collided with a fully loaded oil tanker as the sub surfaced during anti-collision manoeuvres off Toulon.



N-sub killer blast sparks fleet recall

FRANCE LAST night recalled three nuclear-powered attack submarines after an accident that killed 10 sailors aboard a fourth submarine in the Mediterranean.

Rear-Admiral Philippe Roy said that the other submarines were being called back to port because of unanswered questions about yesterday's accident on the 2400-tonne Rubis class *Emeraude*.

The blast, off the French port of Toulon, did not affect the sub's nuclear engine. It was not carrying nuclear missiles and there was no risk of radiation, said a spokesman.

"One of the two turbo alternators, which generate electrical power on board, exploded while the submarine was off the coast. We don't know why," he said.

He added that all 10 people were in the turbine compartment.

The vessel, launched in 1986, was taking part in a training exercise with other vessels. It had surfaced and was making its way back to Toulon unassisted. It was expected to enter port some time last night.

The defence ministry said a high-command investigation and a judicial inquiry had been opened to establish the cause of the accident.

It was the third incident in less than a year involving one of France's six Rubis-class submarines. Between two and four of them are constantly on patrol, armed with Exocet missiles.

One hit the sea bottom at low speed and another struck a supertanker as it surfaced. Both were damaged but no one was hurt.

Of the boats recalled tonight, two were in the Mediterranean and one was in the Atlantic.