

Aldermaston delays confirmed

Navy baffled over disposal of old submarine reactor compartments

By Mark Urban, Defence Correspondent

SERIOUS delays to nuclear warhead production facilities at the Atomic Weapons Establishment at Aldermaston, in Berkshire, were confirmed in Parliament yesterday by senior civil servants.

Members of the House of Commons Defence Committee have been told by officials in private that any further delays to the nuclear warhead component production facility called A90 could cause a shortage of warheads for Britain's new Trident ballistic missile submarines.

The committee also heard that the Royal Navy had no idea how to dispose of the radioactive reactor compartments of its existing nuclear-powered submarines.

In January, *The Independent* revealed details of the delays at Aldermaston and described the ways in which they could undermine the effectiveness of the Trident force in its early years. Tim

Sainsbury, Under Secretary of State for Defence Procurement, commented on the day *The Independent's* report was published: "The headline to the article bore as much closeness to the content of the article as the content of the article bore to reality".

But yesterday civil servants from his ministry confirmed on the record for the first time that details of the delays published in January were accurate:

■ The A90 complex, intended to produce the fissile components at the heart of the Trident warhead, cannot manage full operations before the end of 1992 — two years later than planned.

■ As a result of this delay, more warhead parts than planned will have to be produced in old facilities at Aldermaston. Officials agreed that these facilities were less efficient and that this would lead to further increases in cost.

Civil servants estimated the increase at "under £10m".

■ Shortages of trained staff at the establishment have continued, albeit on a lesser scale than a few years ago. The Ministry of Defence, in written evidence to the committee, admitted that staff were being switched from weapons research to production duties as a means of meeting this shortage, but said that the numbers involved were "very few".

When asked about the implications of any further delay to the A90 complex, John Peters, an Assistant Secretary from the Minis-

try of Defence, said: "It is undeniable that that facility is necessary if we are to meet the requirements of the Trident programme in full." Officials said they were confident that the date for Trident to be in service, at present 1994, would not be delayed by the difficulties at Aldermaston.

The in-service date can, however, be achieved with numbers of warheads well below those planned. Mr Peters said his ministry had "no intention of reducing any part of the capability".

No minister or official has yet publicly denied *The Independent's*

assertion in January that the difficulties at Aldermaston would mean that the first two Trident submarines would have to put to sea with fewer than 100 warheads each. Senior officers at the ministry had previously given the figure of 100 warheads as the minimum necessary to maintain Trident's effectiveness.

On the eve of publication of the Aldermaston article, a senior official at the ministry said he was confident that Vanguard, the first Trident submarine, could be put to sea on time with her planned number of warheads. That claim has not been repeated.

Reflecting on the reasons for the delays in the £1bn building programme at Aldermaston, John Maberley, the Deputy Controller, Nuclear, told the committee: "We simply did not have the depth of experience necessary to manage all those projects." A

management agent would be appointed from industry to oversee the construction projects at Aldermaston.

Yesterday's hearing also shed light on the matter of what can be done to dispose of the Royal Navy's ageing nuclear-powered submarines. After prolonged questioning from Michael Mates, chairman of the Defence Committee, Bernard Day, an assistant under-secretary from the Ministry of Defence, admitted that there was still no plan about what to do with Dreadnought, the oldest nuclear-powered submarine.

Dreadnought lies in Rosyth dockyard. Four Polaris submarines and several hunter-killers are due to be decommissioned before the end of the century.

The radioactive cores can be removed, but this leaves a contaminated reactor compartment. Procurement criticism, page 2

31 March 1988 - Independent