

SCOTLAND on SUNDAY .com**Government under fire as submarines run for cover faulty subs head for port**

THE government's defence policy was under fire last night after the UK's entire fleet of hunter-killer submarines was forced to withdraw to port for vital safety checks.

Opposition parties questioned whether the armed forces were suffering from Treasury inspired cost-cutting after cracks were discovered in a coolant pipe leading to the nuclear reactor of one vessel, sparking fears that the same problem could exist in all 12.

The Ministry of Defence could not say when the fleet would be ready again for duty after the cracked weld was discovered during inspections of HMS Tireless, which limped into Gibraltar in May.

Shadow defence secretary Iain Duncan Smith said: "This is a desperate situation to be in. Serious questions need to be asked as to why the Government has taken so long to make a decision about this when the faults were discovered in May. Why has there been such a delay? "

The defence spokesman for the Liberal Democrats, Menzies Campbell, said: "This is a matter of very considerable embarrassment for the UK. It raises questions of both capability and credibility. "

The armed forces minister John Spellar attempted to play down the scale of the problem, saying there was no safety threat and adding: "We originally thought we were dealing with cracks of about two millimetres, now we are talking about cracks of a few centimetres, as I understand it. That has to be properly investigated by the engineers, and they will draw up a repair plan."

The problems could, however, prove an unexpected boon for Scotland by extending the life of the Rosyth submarine yard in Fife, expected to run out of work by 2002. The yard, with 1,300 workers, is one of only four facilities equipped for the work, along with Faslane, on the Clyde, Devonport in south-east England, and Barrow in Cumbria.

Five of the 12 hunter-killers are based at Faslane, and one, HMS Splendid, is due to return to base within days. Two others are already being refitted at Rosyth.

One estimate has suggested the fleet could be tied up for up to two years. But Lieutenant Commander Jim Jenkins, for the Navy, said: "I think that is highly unlikely. We have four sites, so we could do four at a time. The intention is to try and do the repairs, if needed, in the boats' home ports but we do have options."

By Stephen Fraser

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