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## Labour fears on 'unsafe' Polaris

By Alan Dron

CLAIMS that Britain's Polaris submarines are so unsafe that they have been barred from visiting foreign ports sparked fresh controversy over the ageing fleet yesterday.

Shadow defence spokesman Martin O'Neill said the reports — to be the subject of Thursday's *This Week* programme for Thames Television — were "very disturbing". He would be seeking assurances from Tom King, the Defence Secretary, if they were substantiated.

The programme is to carry an interview with a member of the nuclear warships safety committee who says that the four Polaris boats, plus four older nuclear-powered hunter-killers, are banned from visiting foreign ports because of the major embarrassment that would result from an accident with their reactors while abroad.

Mr O'Neill, Labour MP for Clackmannan, said he would be watching the situation closely. "If there is any substance to the allegations ... then it raises serious questions over nuclear submarines and dangers to the health of submariners, and we will certainly be taking it up with the secretary of state once we've seen the substantive allegations."

The programme's editor, Paul Woolwich, said yesterday it would state that the submarines were "literally cracking up," that the dangers of a nuclear accident were higher

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than had been previously admitted, and that information had been withheld from parliament.

He added that among interviews with submariners, nuclear fitters and Ministry of Defence officials, there would be details of a collision between a British hunter-killer and a Soviet submarine — as well as information on what the British crew members were told to say on their return.

He had been trying for some time to have the Defence Minister, Archie Hamilton, reply to the programme's claims, but the MoD and he had so far been unable to agree on the format such an interview should take.

It is understood that Reginald Farmer, a senior civil servant and member of the nuclear warships safety committee, will appear on the programme, confirming the ban on visiting foreign ports.

An MoD spokesman yesterday declined to comment in detail on the allegations without having seen the programme, but denied any such ban existed.

"We wouldn't allow any submarine to go to sea if we didn't consider it safe to do so," he said, adding: "All our nuclear-powered submarines, including Polaris, continue to operate."

*The Scotsman*, however, understands that of the four Polaris vessels, *Renown* will be in dock with cracks in her reactor system for at least another year, *Revenge* is overdue for repairs, *Repulse* has not been on patrol for 15 months, and that only *Resolution* is fully operational — and then, only with a temporary safety certificate.

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