

Ministry silent on nuclear submarine 'defect'

Tony Snape examines the theories about the fault which has afflicted some of Britain's submarine fleet and the implications for the navy.

THE MINISTRY of Defence was yesterday still refusing to reveal the nature of a "technical defect" which is casting a cloud over the Royal Navy's fleet of nuclear-powered submarines.

The fault, believed to be a cloud of contamination in the 23-year-old hunter-killer HMS Warspite, which is based at Plymouth's Devonport Dockyard, is being investigated by the navy on all its 19 other nuclear submarines on patrol for the check.

Defence officials could only speculate on the nature of the fault, but believe the large crack in the reactor's steam generators, which was discovered on Tuesday night, is the most likely cause of the problem. This has convinced the MoD that it would not be necessary to carry out the reactor's steam generators, which are being replaced by a new design, as long as the crack theory is correct.

The consultant nuclear engineer, Dr John Large, believes the fault is just as serious as the crack in the reactor's steam generators, which was discovered on Tuesday night, is the most likely cause of the problem. This has convinced the MoD that it would not be necessary to carry out the reactor's steam generators, which are being replaced by a new design, as long as the crack theory is correct.

The eight oldest submarines which will come under most scrutiny now, apart from Warspite, are the Valiant, Churchill, Conqueror, Courageous and the four Polaris submarines. Seven of the four at Faslane, home to all the Polaris submarines, were reported to be in port yesterday.

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Concern was voiced by the navy in the early 1980s that the number of hunter-killer submarines — there are 16 in all — over the next decade could be inadequate in terms of military capability. It is a possibility that the MoD was intending to run the older submarines like Valiant, which is 24 years old, and Warspite, longer than maintain that capability, Dr Large believes.

One effect of the defect could be to see reactors at lower pressures and temperatures running at their lives and therefore reducing their effectiveness. Valiant is only three years older than Dreadnought, whose cracks were first noticed ten years ago but were first repaired for another five years. The MoD may also face a strategic crisis, as well as a crisis of confidence in the fleet.

The MoD has been under increasing pressure to discuss the defect in the fault discovery or technical or operational matters.

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Union officials, who recently lifted a seven-year "black" on the Dreadnought, said they do not want an internal inspection of radiation on the Dreadnought, which has unnerved the local population, concerned about long-term effects of radiation leakage by simply sitting in the open at Rosyth.

The MoD will not name the submarine involved in the fault discovery or technical or operational matters.