

Near-meltdown on nuclear sub report denied

Peter Murtagh

THE electrical fault last month in a Polaris submarine based at Faslane, Scotland, was not dangerous and did not lead to a leak of radiation, the Ministry of Defence said at the weekend.

Nobody had been scrubbed down, said a spokesman. He described the fault as a "minor electrical malfunction" but refused to elaborate, or to confirm or deny details in the report.

HMS Resolution, Britain's first nuclear-powered ballistic missile submarine has a pressurised water-cooled reactor. It was built in 1967 and is equipped to carry 10 multiple nuclear warheads of 60 kilotons each.

The Observer newspaper had reported yesterday that the fault on January 26 was due to a failure in the reactor's primary cooling system because the power supply was cut off. The report said that a backup pump did not work and that an emergency power supply also failed to activate. Why the power failed was not known.

The newspaper quoted a for-

mer nuclear submarine officer as saying that the reactor could have been heading for a meltdown.

However, the minister poured scorn on this assessment. Its spokesman said: "I does not know what he is talking about and was not on the sub at the time."

Mr Richard Webb, a former naval officer with the Atomic Energy Commission, said that submarine personnel would have had to work very fast to avert a disaster.

He said that because of the build-up of heat in the reactor with the failure of the cooling system there could have been "some form of non-nuclear explosion but with enormous energy potential".

The ministry said that the Clyde public safety scheme used to inform local people of the event of a nuclear emergency — had not been activated by the base commander.

Mr Dennis Canavan, the Labour MP for Falkirk west, criticised the ministry of a cover-up. "The public are entitled to know exactly what dangers arise from the Government's nuclear defence policy," he said at the weekend.

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Nuclear subs checked for 'defect'

ALL Royal Navy nuclear-powered submarines are to be checked after the discovery of a fault in one vessel's nuclear reactor, it was revealed last night.

The Ministry of Defence said a "technical defect" was found during a routine refit, which is understood to have been carried out at Devonport dockyard in Plymouth.

It is believed the vessel was one of the Valiant class which includes HMS Conqueror, the vessel responsible for sinking the Belgrano during the Falklands conflict.

Last night unofficial sources revealed that the Conqueror suffered a "serious incident" in its nuclear reactor on the way to the Falklands in 1982, which resulted in the reactor being shut down.

However, it was not known whether the two faults were related.

The MoD said submarines in harbour were being checked for the defect, while those at sea would be inspected when they returned to port.

A Ministry spokesman stressed there was no danger to personnel working on the refit, and added: "The submarines are not unsafe. Safety is paramount."

Although the MoD would not discuss the nature of the defect, it is clear that it occurred in the nuclear reactor.

The most likely fault is thought to be a hair-line fracture in the primary cooling system.

Labour's Navy spokesman, Roland Boyes, said he would be demanding a statement from the Defence Secretary, Tom King, in the Commons today. "I am greatly concerned about the effect this defect might have had on the men," he said.

"I will be calling on Mr King to carry out immediate checks to ensure that the defects give rise to no contamination."

The five-vessel Valiant class is the oldest in service, built between 1962 and 1968. The nuclear reactor cores were made in the UK with machinery of British design.