

Tuesday, 22 June 1993

Row over response to Faslane alert

SC

22/6/93

By Denny Macgee

A MAJOR row has broken out over the failure of senior officers at the Faslane nuclear submarine base to contact civil emergency planning officials in response to a full-scale nuclear alert at the base.

The issuing of the alert for what turned out to be a minor spillage of very low-level radioactive coolant on board the Polaris submarine HMS Repulse was described yesterday by the Ministry of Defence as an "over-reaction".

But there was anger that when the alarm was sounded on Sunday nobody contacted Strathclyde region's emergency planning officer, John McVicar, prompting claims that the MoD was more interested in cover-ups than in the safety of the public.

The issue will be raised today at a meeting of the Clyde Safety Scheme, where naval officials and representatives of local authorities meet to discuss safety measures surrounding the base.

Although it is not officially on the agenda for the meeting, it is certain that local representatives on the committee will demand answers and reassurances from the Commodore Clyde, John Trewby, when they meet in the base.

The local Labour MP, John McFall, is to write to the Defence Secretary, Malcolm Rifkind, with the timetable of events over the weekend, urging him to carry out a full investigation.

Mr McFall said that the full-scale alert at the base was called at 1:28am on Sunday morning. However, it was not until an hour later that the local police at Helensburgh were informed of an incident.

Mr McVicar was not informed at any time during the

Sunday that anything had happened. Although he was making no public statement on the matter, it is understood he contacted senior naval officers at Faslane yesterday, making it clear that he was less than happy that his first knowledge of any incident was through the media.

The Defence Minister, Jonathan Aitken, yesterday told the Commons that the full scale alert was a "correct but over-cautious response by staff".

A spokesman at the base confirmed that the internal inquiry into the incident was continuing. It had been identified early in the procedure that there was no danger to the public and therefore it was not necessary to alert either Strathclyde

Region's emergency planning officer or put local hospitals on emergency stand-by, he said.

Three sailors who were splashed by the leaked liquid underwent decontamination and were unharmed.

However, Councillor Iain MacDonald, chairman of Nuclear Free Zones Scotland, who lives near the base, said yesterday: "The MoD is claiming that the whole thing is a mistake and someone pressed the wrong button. That may or may not be true. But for a full-scale alert to be called at Faslane and then not to call Strathclyde's emergency planning officer is frightening and only goes to prove that the Ministry of Defence is more interested in trying to cover up this sort of incident than in the safety of the public."

The Scottish Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament said: "This incident is symptomatic of the dangers involved in the whole nuclear business."