

US admits civilians may have caused sub disaster

THE UNITED States navy yesterday admitted that civilians on board the nuclear attack submarine, *Greeneville*, could have contributed to the collision which sank a Japanese fishing vessel in the Pacific Ocean, writes Robert Tait in Washington.

The stark acknowledgment came after it was disclosed that two civilians were at the controls of the submarine when it surfaced at high speed and collided with the *Ehime Maru* off the coast of Hawaii last Friday. Nine Japanese people are missing, presumed drowned, as a result of the accident.

Yesterday, with relations between the United States and Japan already strained, the navy conceded that the presence of the civilians could have distracted crew members when they were performing an emergency manoeuvre which involved the 362ft submarine diving to 400ft below water, blasting air into its ballast tanks and then rocketing to the surface.

At the same time, officials raised the possibility of criminal proceedings stemming from the investigation into the accident. The *Greeneville*'s captain,

Commander Scott Waddle, has been relieved of duty pending the investigation.

The navy that said while there was no evidence to suggest that the presence of civilians – one of whom was at the helm – had caused the accident, it could have been a factor.

"I'm sure that will be looked into. But we don't have any evidence of that whatsoever," a navy official said.

The revelation that civilians had been at the controls at the time of the accident was accompanied by official disclaimers that they were never in control of the vessel and that their actions were closely supervised by experienced crew members.

"Does it look bad?" said Rear Admiral Stephen Pietropaoli. "Only to people who don't understand how submarines work."

It is not unusual for civilians to be taken on board US navy submarines as a public relations exercise. There were 16 on board the *Greeneville* at the time of Friday's accident.

However, the revelations provoked more outrage from Japan, where the submarine crew has already been heavily

criticised for not coming to the *Ehime Maru*'s aid after the collision.

"A civilian wouldn't know what to do," said Ryoichi Miya, the first mate of the *Ehime Maru*, said yesterday. "It's absolutely unforgivable if a civilian was operating it."

The collision has caused much diplomatic embarrassment for the Bush administration, which has already issued an official apology.

On Tuesday, President George Bush telephoned the Japanese prime minister, Yoshiro Mori, to apologise and offer help in the search for the nine people missing.

Off Hawaii, that search continued yesterday. Twenty six people on board the *Ehime Maru* were rescued after it sank in 1,800ft of water.

The thirty-five on board included teachers and students from a fishing school in southwestern Japan.

The US "Super Scorpio," a cumbersome 4,500lb robot vehicle device controlled from a surface ship and capable of diving 5,000ft, arrived in Hawaii to examine the possibility of raising the *Ehime Maru*.

Nuclear sub on fire

HMS *Conqueror*, the nuclear submarine that sank the *Belgrano*, caught fire on August 26th while in dock at Devonport, Plymouth.

The blaze started in the engine room, and lasted for an hour. A spokesperson said there was no danger to the sub's reactor. But local anti-nuclear activists, concerned that the public was not warned, would like to know: when is a fire on board a nuclear submarine a danger?