



SUBS IN TROUBLE

A submariner stands in the plume of steam given off by a Polaris submarine entering the dry dock at Faslane for routine servicing.

On February 14th The Observer broke the story of an incident involving the reactor of the Polaris submarine "Resolution" at Faslane submarine base in January.

It is disturbing that it took the enquiries of a national newspaper to reveal the incident to the public, and even more disturbing that, a month since the story appeared and nearly two months since the incident happened, the public is little better informed of the full facts.

The Observer story stated that an electrical failure shut down the primary cooling system on the sub's pressurised water reactor. Two back-up pumps which were supposed to keep the coolant flowing in such circumstances were not operating, and an emergency generator which should have started up automatically failed to do so, meaning that heat started to build up in the reactor core.

In the circumstances this could have very quickly led to a deformation of the reactor's core, and in the worst case, to a melt-down and the possibility of a violent explosion which could scatter radioactive material over a wide area, like a mini-Chernobyl. The effects could have been worse if missiles and warheads were still installed on the submarine, which is a distinct possibility.

A disaster was only averted by the swift action of two seamen who started up a diesel generator to power the cooling system.

The MoD have since confirmed that a "minor electrical malfunction" did occur, but that appropriate action was immediately taken.

The Observer article also claimed that one seaman was exposed to radiation during the incident, a claim which was repeated from different sources in the

Lennox Herald, which also said he lives in the Vale of Leven. These reports, and local rumours, maintain that he had to be repeatedly scrubbed down over 24 hours, which would indicate that a release from the reactor or cooling system took place. The MoD's denials that anything of the sort took place would be more credible if their past record of truthfulness were better - when two nuclear warhead carriers collided in Helensburgh town centre in 1985 police pushed people into shops while the situation was assessed: the MoD later denied that this had happened. Lack of openness in such minor details makes it hard to trust their word on more serious ones. We will probably never know for sure - if the seaman came forward with the facts, he would face dismissal and a prosecution under the Official Secrets Act.

This is by no means the first incident involving the UK's sub reactors*, nor is it the first one involving HMS Resolution, the oldest of the Polaris fleet. YIV's documentary "Inside Britain's Bomb" revealed that an earlier leak may have caused the high incidence of hare lip and cleft palate in children born to the wives of crewmen. Some people who took part in this documentary were subjected to intimidation after it was broadcast.

In these circumstances it is no surprise that even democratically-elected representatives have difficulties getting straight answers about the risks we face. Dumbarton MP John McFall tried unsuccessfully to question George Younger directly. In the end he had to place a series of written questions, which were finally answered by Minister of State for the Armed Forces Ian Stewart.

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*The Guardian reported on 3/3, 88 that a study by the nuclear department at the Greenwich

Royal Naval College revealed more than 700 incidents involving UK sub reactors during the first 16 years of their operation, ranging from routine tests to major problems.