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# Safety fears over nuclear sub's return to service

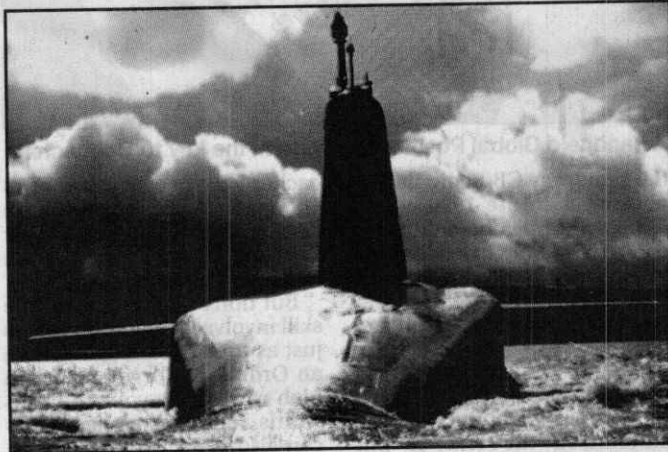
By **Stephen Naysmith**

THE nuclear-powered submarine HMS Triumph is to return to active service despite the fact that it has not been physically checked for a critical safety flaw, the Sunday Herald has learned.

The revelation comes as Britain became embroiled last night in a diplomatic row over the MoD's refusal to let Spanish experts inspect the reactor of another Trafalgar-class nuclear powered submarine, HMS Tireless. The submarine has been docked in Gibraltar since May, when it developed a coolant leak.

On Friday, the Spanish Nuclear Safety Council sent inspectors to visit Tireless and ensure it was safe to repair it in Gibraltar, but opposition politicians in Spain branded the visit a diplomatic stunt.

Tireless has some cracking measuring several centimetres in a coolant pipe. It has been claimed that the submarine was in danger of a Chernobyl-style nuclear meltdown just before it fled to dock in Gibraltar. A Navy spokesman admitted to the Sunday Herald: "The defect in HMS Tireless couldn't be more severe."



**A Trafalgar-class nuclear submarine**

However, this week Defence Minister Geoff Hoon told the House of Commons that five submarines, including HMS Triumph, had been cleared of the defect while six others showed signs of the same problem that has crippled Tireless. Of the "clean" submarines, four are in dock for maintenance or refit. Triumph is the only vessel available for normal duties – which include escorting the nuclear-armed Trident sub-

marines and other covert operations.

The Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament is alarmed that Triumph is to return to service, arguing that as it was at sea until recently, it cannot yet have been properly checked.

Meanwhile, Dr Frank Barnaby, a former nuclear physicist, said putting Triumph back to sea was unjustifiable.

"They can't possibly know that Triumph is safe," he said.

"It would take weeks to do a proper inspection."

The implications are alarming, he said: "If a weld goes, you could get a pretty big split in the pipe and enough coolant could escape to cause the core of the reactor to heat up to very dangerous levels. It is even possible for that to include meltdown."

Meanwhile sources have revealed to the Sunday Herald that even as recently as last week, MoD nuclear experts still had little idea why the faults had occurred.

They also confirmed reports that Tireless had been close to meltdown. "Tireless had reached a critical point when her reactor was shut down. They were dead lucky they didn't lose the boat," the source said.

Royal Navy spokesman Lieutenant Commander Jim Jenkins conceded that HMS Triumph had not undergone a physical examination of the suspect weld. "She's been inspected in exactly the same way as the others," he said.

"We are absolutely, totally convinced of Triumph's safety."

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