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## All hunter-killer subs withdrawn in reactor alert

By Linus Gregoriadis

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BRITAIN'S entire fleet of nuclear hunter-killer submarines has been taken out of service after the discovery of a defect linked to the boats' reactors.

The Royal Navy has withdrawn the 12 submarines after an inspection of Tireless, a Trafalgar class boat which was towed into Gibraltar in May with a leak in its reactor cooling system. The withdrawal of the hunter-killers will cause alarm because there is not now a submarine capable of patrolling the waters around Britain.

A Navy spokesman confirmed last night that all the submarines were being examined for the defect, but said that only two of the submarines had been in active service. He said: "We want to carry out precautionary checks on the welding following the inspection of Tireless."

The problem does not affect the Navy's four Vanguard class Trident submarines armed with ballistic missiles because they have a different reactor design. One of the roles of the hunter-killer fleet, made up of seven Trafalgar class and five Swiftsure class vessels, is to protect the Trident submarines when they go on patrol.

The Ministry of Defence defended the decision to withdraw all the vessels. It said it was unclear how long it would take to carry out checks on the submarines. The Navy spokesman said: "In the world we are living in we made a decision that we could investigate a potential defect. We are not prepared to sacrifice nuclear safety."

The decision follows the withdrawal last month of two submarines in the same fleet because of a potential unrelated fault. Sovereign and Superb were declared non-operational because the Ministry of Defence said it was not prepared to place crews at unnecessary risk.

The latest problem follows repair work on the Trafalgar class Tireless in Gibraltar. The work disclosed a fault in a welding joint which could be common to the whole fleet. Tireless's arrival in Gibraltar provoked a

diplomatic row when the Defence Ministry said that it wanted to repair the damage in a dock there rather than tow it back to Britain.

Triumph, another Trafalgar class vessel, will sail back from the French port of Toulon to its base at Devonport, Plymouth, tomorrow. Splendid, a Swiftsure class vessel, has been ordered to return to its base at Faslane on the Clyde.

The remaining submarines, apart from Tireless, are already at base undergoing maintenance or refits. Iain Duncan Smith, the Conservative defence spokesman, described the situation as "desperate". The Royal Navy was in its worst state since the Second World War, he said.

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