

The Tories accused Geoff Hoon, Defence Secretary, of trying to "slide out" of announcing the withdrawal. The MoD has admitted that a flaw found in Tireless could affect all seven boats of the Trafalgar class and all five boats of the older Swiftsure class.

A full inspection of the fleet is being carried out and even those boats declared free of the defect will be in port for weeks. Mr Spellar said the problem did not affect the four Vanguard class boats that carry the Trident nuclear deterrent.

But defence sources said that without the hunter-killers to serve as escorts the Trident fleet would be left vulnerable. Iain Duncan Smith, the shadow defence secretary, criticised Mr Hoon for refusing to make a Commons statement and for leaving Mr Spellar to take the flak.

He said: "The Government has tried to avoid giving any full answers on this situation and yet again tried to deny the House and the public the truth about this issue."

It was a "damning position" that the Opposition had to bring the Government to the Dispatch Box on a matter affecting the defence of the realm. Mr Duncan Smith said that news of the recall of all hunter-killer boats had been slipped out over the weekend when the House was not sitting.

The MoD said that no snub to the Tories had been intended and that Mr Spellar had answered the private notice question because he was armed forces minister. "Mr Hoon was not in London, but even if he had been he would not have answered the question because it is Mr Spellar's issue."

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