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Nuclear subs hit by safety fears

By Neil Tweedie

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TWO Royal Navy nuclear-powered submarines were lying inactive last night because of a potentially dangerous fault in the propulsion system of a sister vessel.

The Ministry of Defence said it had declared Sovereign and Superb non-operational because it was not prepared to place their crews at unnecessary risk. Both submarines, which carry crews of 116 officers and men, should have been available for deployment at short notice from Faslane on the Clyde.

The latest troubles, added to problems with the newer Trafalgar class boats, mean that only four out of 12 attack submarines are thought to be available for service in the short term. The defect - in the submarine Sceptre - was discovered in 1998 when she was beginning a two-and-a-half-year refit. But the MoD said that its full seriousness had not been appreciated until more recent tests. It refused to give details, but said that the concern was over the quality of components in the nuclear reactor systems.

Only Sceptre has been confirmed as having the defective components. But the MoD said: "One would not operate a reactor when one did not have absolute confidence in its safety." The submarines affected are members of the five-strong Swiftsure class, which makes up almost half of Britain's fleet of nuclear-powered attack submarines. They are the oldest submarines in service, all having been built between 1974 and 1981. They are not due to be replaced until at least 2004 when Astute class boats begin to enter service.

Of the remaining two members of the class, Splendid has been declared safe to operate until next February and Spartan is in refit. Examination of Spartan has so far not revealed the defect. The problems with the Trafalgar submarines have been particularly embarrassing for the Navy. Of the seven submarines in the class, Tireless is lying crippled in dock at Gibraltar following a cooling system failure during exercises in the Mediterranean. Gibraltarians have angrily demanding that she be towed to Britain for repair.

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Tireless's sister boat, Talent, is also laid up after the detection of a major defect and will not be operational until the end of the year. Britain's four Vanguard class boats, which carry the Trident nuclear deterrent, are understood not to be affected by the problems being experienced in the hunter-killer fleet. Britain is one of only a handful of nations to operate nuclear-powered submarines and the Royal Navy has a good safety record. No British nuclear boat has been lost since operations began in the Sixties.

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