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Lengthy layoff for UK nuclear submarines

Britain's strike force of nuclear submarines could be withdrawn from active service for months due to a flaw in the reactor cooling system that may be "generic", the Government said today.

The 12 hunter-killer nuclear submarines are to undergo intensive checks following a detailed inspection of *HMS Tireless*, which limped into Gibraltar in May with a leak in pipework leading from the nuclear reactor system.

The Government withdrew the Royal Navy's nuclear-powered hunter-killer submarines as "responsible nuclear operators", John Spellar, the Defence Minister, said today in response to an emergency question in the Commons.

The submarines are a vital part of the Royal Navy's operational capability and are often used to protect larger submarines armed with the Trident nuclear deterrent from "enemy" vessels.

Mr Spellar said: "Initial indications are that the defect may have arisen from the original construction of the submarine and that it is present in other submarines, albeit at an early stage.

"Let me stress that Vanguard Class Trident submarines, which are of a different design, have not been affected. Until the inspection programme is completed, it is not possible to finalise the repair programme or to quantify the operational implications."

Mr Spellar added that because of the exacting tolerances required for nuclear engineering "it may take some months for submarines to be repaired where this is necessary".

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