

Gibraltar steps up row over British sub

Guardian 17/8/2000

Richard Norton-Taylor

The Ministry of Defence was last night threatened with unprecedented legal and industrial action if it goes ahead with plans to repair a nuclear-powered submarine moored off Gibraltar.

The government of the British territory yesterday joined an escalating campaign among increasingly angry Gibraltarians demanding access to secret MoD reports on the safety implications of the plan to fix the submarine's nuclear reactor cooling system.

The Gibraltar government says it was initially given the impression by the MoD that there was "no risk at all" involved in repairing HMS *Tireless* in the harbour of the Rock.

Sir John Cadogan, chairman of the defence nuclear safety committee and professor of chemistry at London University, has now said the risk is "modest", according to sources close to the Gibraltar government. He is reported to have told the government that there would be no greater risk than repairing the submarine in a British dockyard, such as Devonport, specially equipped to deal with damaged nuclear submarines.

However, this view was challenged yesterday by a source familiar with the problems

confronting the *Tireless*. He described the risk of repairing the submarine on the Rock as "high". He said the fault was located above valves controlling pressure to the submarine's generators close to the reactor itself. Leaking water was close to the reactor's fuel, he added.

This, according to other sources, is why the MoD abandoned plans to tow the submarine back to Devonport where the fuel would have been drained from the reactor.

The proximity of the leaking water and the fuel carries the risk of spillage from the submarine in the event of any abrupt movement, sources who did not want to be identified told the *Guardian*.

Peter Caruana, chief minister, said: "What is concerning Gibraltar, which has a long and close relationship with the MoD, is that while we are used to receiving visits from nuclear submarines, and we are relaxed about that, there is no experience in Gibraltar of repairs to broken down nuclear submarines being undertaken here.

"The position that the government have adopted and have maintained is that repairs should only be carried out in Gibraltar if there is no risk to public health from the carrying out of repairs," he told BBC radio.

Mr Caruana said his government wanted the MoD to hand over its safety case so that a panel of independent experts could assess Gibraltar's suitability as a place for the repairs to be done.

He added: "The MoD have declined to make that information available to the Government, the Government is therefore unable to say whether the repairs are safe or not.

"I think the MoD needs to think long and hard about whether it proceeds with the repairs in Gibraltar unless the government and people of Gibraltar can be satisfied."

Lawyers acting for groups representing a broad cross-section of the Gibraltarian community, including the local branch of the Transport and General Workers' Union, sent a letter to the MoD demanding access to its official safety assessment. They are considering taking the issue to the high court in Britain.

Levi Attias, spokesman for the Voice of Gibraltar group, accused the ministry of "sheer disregard for the rights of Gibraltarians".

The MoD said it had followed "exhaustive procedures" to assess the risks involved. The safety case would be presented to the Gibraltar government on Monday.