Damaged British nuclear submarine in Gibraltar harbor

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For more than three months the damaged British nuclear submarine, *HMS Tireless*, has been lying in harbor at the British crown colony of Gibraltar. On May 12 the submarine was probably operating in the vicinity of Sicily in the Mediterranean when its nuclear reactor had to be closed down owing to a malfunctioning of the cooling system. It then managed to reach the British military base of Gibraltar where it was put into moorage.

The inhabitants of Gibraltar, as well as those of the adjacent Spanish towns of La Linea, Algeciras and the heavily populated stretch of the Costa del Sol, are extremely worried about the situation. Already deeply alarmed by the tragic fate of the of the Russian submarine, the *Kursk*, local people have been further unsettled by the catastrophic information policy of the British Ministry of Defense. The incident of May 12 was first made known to the public on May 18. Circumstances surrounding the accident were kept strictly secret. Later, all the military had to offer were placatory gestures and contradictory statements.

Initially the authorities announced that splits had occurred in the reactor but that cooling fluid had not spilled out. Then the navy admitted that cooling water had indeed escaped, but claimed that it was not radioactive and therefore never constituted a danger for people or the environment. Contrary to this report, Carlos Bravo, a representative of Greenpeace, maintained it was not known how much fluid had escaped or where it had seeped to - and that a radioactive contamination of the sea should be assumed to have taken place.

Another serious concern is the decision of the British military to repair the reactor leak in Gibraltar harbor. Originally it was planned to tow the submarine to a special dock in Britain. However, because this would have taken too long, would have been too expensive and, above all, too dangerous in the rough seas of the Atlantic, London decided to carry out repairs in Gibraltar.

In mid-August the inhabitants of Gibraltar reacted against this decision with the first demonstrations. According to Greenpeace, Gibraltar harbor lacks the logistical requirements for the kind of dangerous repair work needed for the *Tireless*. But assuming that hauling the submarine back to Britain was indeed too dangerous to contemplate, an emergency plan had to be adopted immediately. Consequently, the Spanish government has also become involved.

On August 24, representatives of the Gibraltar government were instructed by the Ministry of Defense in London about technical aspects relating to the accident. The British tried to convince them that the repairing of the cooling system was really a straightforward matter. However, feeling they had not been sufficiently informed about the situation, the Gibraltar officials persuaded the British to postpone commencement of repairs.

A few days later, the Spanish newspaper *El Pais* posted a report about a letter sent last year by the commander of the British military base in Portsmouth to the members of the Southampton city council. The letter clearly shows that safety measures for the handling of repairs to British nuclear submarines are strictly regulated to the smallest detail.

The concerned councilors of Southampton were assured that harbors used by the British navy were divided into various categories. Southampton, like Gibraltar, fell into category Z. In harbors of this type—distinguished by a lack of suitable infrastructure facilities—no submarines with damaged reactors were permitted to be repaired. They were not even allowed to enter the harbor. Z category harbors were those lacking appropriately trained teams of doctors, having no scope for mass evacuations and offering no organized plan for the issuing of iodine tablets to inhabitants in the immediate vicinity of an accident site. On the other hand, harbors of category X—like Davonport or Faslane—were planned and equipped for such demanding conditions.

According to these safety regulations, the damaged *HMS Tireless* should on no account have been allowed to call into Gibraltar harbor. Lieutenant-colonel Jim Jenkin, a spokesman for the British Ministry of Defense, insisted that a damaged nuclear submarine had never before undergone repairs in a harbor like the one at Gibraltar. Nevertheless, military and “independent” civilian experts— from the Naval Nuclear Safety Panel and the Nuclear Defense Safety Committee respectively—said that exceptionally, the *Tireless* should be repaired at Gibraltar.

Municipal and regional politicians from nearby parts of Spain have demanded more detailed information from the

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governments of both Gibraltar and Spain. The environmental protection organization, *Ecologistas en Accion*, is gathering signatures calling for the removal of the *Tireless* from Algeciras bay and is organizing further demonstrations. But despite popular protests, attempts by lawyers from Gibraltar to delay the repairs by means of a temporary restraining injunction and plans for legal proceedings via the European Court of Justice by the municipal authority in neighboring La Linea, the right-wing government in Madrid has assented to the repair work and praised the British information policy.

Spain's prime minister, José Maria Aznar, is keen not to fall out with Britain because he is currently trying to build a strategic alliance between Madrid and London with the British prime minister, Tony Blair — an alliance designed to counter the Paris-Berlin axis within the European Union.

Situated at the southern end of the Iberian peninsula and at the western entrance to the Mediterranean Sea, Gibraltar has been under British control since 1713. For the past two centuries it has been a strategically important military base for the British. Today, with a population of barely 30,000, it serves above all as a tax haven. Being excepted from a range of EU fiscal regulations (for example, the levying of value added and sales taxes), it is not part of the European customs union, nor is it subject to the common agricultural policy. About 53,000 firms—most of them fake business fronts—are registered in Gibraltar.

Spain has never accepted British sovereignty over Gibraltar. During the Franco dictatorship, Gibraltar was a continual source of conflict between Spain and Britain. Fearing a Spanish invasion, Harold Wilson's Labour government increased British military presence on the island from 1967 on. In the late 1960s, Franco introduced a series of restrictions to border traffic and in 1969 this culminated in a complete military blockade.

Up until last year, controversy over Gibraltar remained acute. The Spanish authorities claimed that Gibraltar had attained prosperity through “parasitical” means, drawing attention to tax evasion and money laundering as the country's source of wealth. They increased border controls and threatened to close off Spanish air routes for foreign flights to Gibraltar.

However, in relation to the current situation—a situation that has deeply unsettled and enraged over 250,000 inhabitants of Andalusia—the Spanish government is standing shoulder to shoulder with the British. In a situation where the priorities of foreign policy are being redefined, Prime Minister Aznar cannot afford conflict with the Blair government. For their part, the British have made it clear that they will not budge from their stance in the affair. The Labour government is under great pressure to increase military spending and to put the UK's submarine fleet into shape again as soon as possible.

On August 27, the British paper *The Sunday Telegraph* revealed that, apart from the *Tireless*, another four submarines of the same type are experiencing technical problems. The vessels *Torbay*, *Talent*, *Trenchant* and *Triumph* are all in moorage in Davenport harbor for routine repairs and maintenance work. Iain Duncan, the Tory spokesman on defense matters, condemned Labour for not providing enough resources for the navy and therefore being responsible for the fact that Britain currently lacks an effective submarine fleet.

According to the magazine *Warship World*, problems affecting submarines like the *Trafalgar* —the same type of vessel as the *Tireless* —severely impair Britain's capacity to react to international crises. And this is happening at a time when the ability to react to crises is becoming the central concern of military strategy. In the last three years alone, Britain has carried out 38 military missions overseas — including those currently underway in East Timor, Kosovo and Iraq.

Governments throughout Europe are now restructuring their armies in accordance with this strategy. In contrast to the era of the Cold War—when a possible confrontation with the Warsaw Pact was at the center of strategic considerations—armies are now being formed to be flexible, readily deployable and in a position to intervene anywhere in the world in the shortest possible time.

On this issue, the British military and the British government are in complete agreement. However, the generals are continually stressing that they require greater financial backing in order to effect the restructuring demanded by the Labour government. This is a demand that is also increasingly being voiced within the ranks of New Labour itself.

An analysis of the background to the situation developing in Gibraltar points to the following conclusion. It is, above all, financial and military strategic reasons which have led Britain to decide to ignore their own safety regulations, carry out dangerous repairs to the *HMS Tireless* in Gibraltar harbor, and thereby expose hundreds of thousands of people to a potential outbreak of deadly radioactivity.

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