

By Nigel Green, Research Associate, U K Defence Forum

The Royal Navy is preparing for one of its biggest exercises in recent years. Taurus 09 will see a task force of 12 ships leave Plymouth on February 18, heading for the Mediterranean, the Middle East and South East Asia.

The Task Force includes two nuclear powered submarines, as well as the Landing Platform Docks (LPDs) HMS Bulwark and HMS Ocean and the Type 23 frigates HMS Argyll and HMS Somerset. The Royal Fleet Auxiliary has provided the vessels Mounts Bay, Lyme Bay, Wave Ruler and Fort Austin.

Also taking part will be Royal Marines from 40 Commando in Taunton, the Fleet Diving Unit, Assault Squadron Royal Marines from Plymouth, elements of 820 and 857 Naval Air Squadrons from RNAS Culdrose, 847 NAS and Commando Helicopter Force Sea Kings based in Yeovil and Support Helicopter Force Chinooks from 18 Squadron, RAF Odiham.

The Task Force also includes a US Navy destroyer, the USS Mitscher, and the French Navy frigate, the FS Duplex.

At its height, 3,300 personnel will take part in the 20,400 mile round-trip deployment, interacting and training with 17 nations.

Bob Ainsworth, the Minister of State for the Armed Forces, said: "In addition to the Royal Navy's contribution to current operations, exercising its open ocean and amphibious capability is vital to demonstrating its global reach and maintaining its capacity to deliver maritime security. "This deployment illustrates the Navy's versatility. It is a world class service and deploying this task group will hone its war-fighting skills."

Taurus 09 will be split into two phases. Phase One will involve training with nations in the Mediterranean, culminating in a series of amphibious landings in Turkey as part of Exercise Egermen. Phase Two will see part of the Task Group deploy through the Suez Canal, culminating in multi-national training in the jungles of Brunei. The training will also include the Bangladeshi Navy, the first such interaction in more than a decade.

Spearheading the deployment from his Command Ship HMS BULWARK is Royal Navy will be Commodore Peter Hudson, who is Commander of the UK Amphibious Task Group. He said: "Taurus is a great opportunity for the Royal Navy to demonstrate and practise a wide range of skills, specifically anti-submarine and amphibious warfare.

"Everybody involved is looking forward to this deployment, which has real opportunities for all. Deploying a maritime force across the globe for prolonged periods defines a premier Navy's

capability. It is what we do and we do it well. It is important for UK defence that we can take such a commitment in our stride".

The Task Force is expected to return in August 2009.