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► **The BBC's Jon Leyne in Moscow**
 "It could well be too late."

real 56k

► **British rescue team, Cmdr Alan Hoskins**
 "Ready to face whatever circumstances we find."

real 56k

► **The BBC's Simon Wilson in Kirkenes, Norway**
 "Eagerly anticipating the arrival of the

Race to save stricken sub



The Norwegian ship Normand Pioneer will carry the LR5 British and Norwegian rescue crews are sailing to the Arctic circle in a race to save the crew of a crippled Russian submarine.

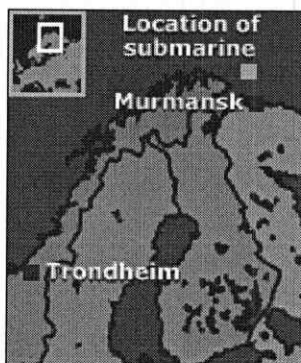
Norwegian deep sea divers left for the Barents sea early on Thursday, and will be joined by a British mini-submarine and rescue team, but both groups are expected to take at least two days to get there.

The situation was described by the Russian Prime Minister Mikhail Kasyanov as "close to catastrophic" as he opened a session of the Russian Government, following the nuclear vessel's fifth night on the seabed.

The Kursk sank during military exercises on Saturday, apparently as a result of an explosion on board.

The crew was thought to have enough oxygen to last until Friday, although the Russian navy has now revised that estimate to nine days - until 25 August.

So far, attempts by Russian rescue capsules to dock with the Kursk, have been frustrated by strong



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Arrival of the British submarine" real 56k

underwater currents and poor visibility, though the weather is improving.

The Russian Defence Minister Igor Sergeev says he now has irrefutable data showing that the submarine hit an underwater object.

President Vladimir Putin ordered the acceptance of western assistance amid growing concern about the fate of the 118 seamen on board. A Russian commission meets shortly to decide how to proceed with the rescue attempt.

Hope

Hopes have been fading for the submariners aboard. Mr Kasyanov said: "One would like to hope that there are chances of saving the crew."

"Last night there were no major changes, neither for the worse, nor for the better."

The British LR5 mini-sub and other rescue material, including portable decompression was loaded on to a cargo ship at the Norwegian port of Trondheim before dawn on Thursday.

The LR5 has never been used in a real rescue operation, but it was designed for just such a life-or-death situation as that facing the crippled Russian craft.

The Russians said there was no sign of life aboard the submarine on Wednesday, but that this did not mean that there were no survivors.

Commander Alan Hoskins of the UK rescue team told the BBC that his men were trying to remain optimistic about the prospects of rescuing some of the trapped Russian sailors alive.

"We are trying to be as optimistic as possible, and as hopeful as possible," he said. "We hope that we will get there and still find that people have survived and we can rescue as many people as possible."

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Kursk timeline

Saturday: Sinks in Barents Sea during exercises

Monday: Russian navy inspects stricken sub

Tuesday: Attempts to attach rescue capsule fail

Wednesday: Russians report no signs of life in the Kursk. Accept help from the West

Thursday: British and Norwegian craft readied for rescue attempt

Anguish

The Russian navy has denied US reports that at least two explosions caused the vessel to sink, but has refused to comment further.

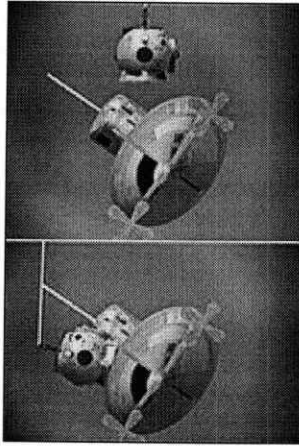
President Putin was reported to have consulted with US President Bill Clinton on the rescue mission.

Russia's press had earlier accused the Russian Navy of risking the crew's lives, saying navy chiefs had refused Nato help out of pride.

As the uncertainty continued, families of the trapped sailors described their anguish as a living "hell."

"The worst thing is the lack of information," said Galina, whose commander husband Viktor Belogunya is among those trapped.

The LR5 sub is a 33ft-long craft described as an "underwater helicopter", with a sophisticated camera system and an array of debris-clearing tools.



A graphic from Russian TV showing the difficulty of the rescue mission

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