

Russia's fleet is dilapidated

Trapped submariners are victims of shoddy equipment

IT REQUIRES little imagination to shudder at the fate of the 100 and more Russian sailors trapped in a submarine at the bottom of the Barents Sea. Unless there is a nautical miracle of remarkable proportions it seems that rescue is as unlikely as a restoration of power and control to the stricken submarine. But the sad fact, which the Russian authorities have always been reluctant to face, is that the Russian navy is in a dilapidated state, with poor equipment shoddily maintained and with ill-trained and badly-paid officers and men.

The history of the Soviet and now Russian nuclear submarine fleet is littered with accidents which have led to the deaths of more than 500 men, and that represents only the accidents of which we know. The crisis in the navy became public knowledge in 1997 when a retired naval officer, Alexander Nikitin, was charged with high treason for supplying details of radio-

active contamination of the Kola peninsula to Norwegian environmentalists. The harrying of Nikitin so upset his father-in-law, a retired Russian admiral, that he leaked details of the losses of two nuclear submarines which implicated the then commander of the Northern Fleet for sending the submarines to sea with ill-prepared or untrained crews.

None of this was a surprise. The Northern Fleet has been drastically short of money for the past decade. At times, nuclear submarines sailed without the full complement of officers, and efforts to earn money by private enterprise led to a fleet submarine transporting potatoes and fruit from the Kola peninsula to the Yamal peninsula in 1995. There are expectations that President Putin, who is aware of these facts, will improve the situation. It will be too late, though, for the poor men at the bottom of the Barents Sea.

A nuclear-sub accident waiting to happen

THE crew of the Russian nuclear attack submarine K-141 Kursk deserved a better fate. Brave men, trapped too deep to escape, deep under a freezing sea, in a steel coffin devoid of power, they are perhaps the last victims of the Cold War. They bear the all too human cost of the hasty and environmentally reckless Soviet naval build-up that followed Khrushchev's humiliation during the 1961 Cuban missile crisis. Stung by the ability of the United States under John F Kennedy to throw a blockade around the sea lanes approaching Cuba, the embarrassed Soviet Navy embarked on the creation of an ocean-going fleet to match that of America. In particular, it determined to build more and larger nuclear submarines than were possessed by the West. To achieve this goal quickly it consciously sacrificed safety for its crews and for the entire ocean environment.

The result was breathtaking leviathans such as the Typhoon class nuclear submersible, longer than two football fields and carrying 200 nuclear warheads. But the result was also the deaths, since 1961, of a staggering 507 Soviet and Russian sailors as a result of a bewildering variety of accidents to their nuclear submarines. Reactor fires, leaks to reactor cooling systems, leaks of toxic fuels from on-board ballistic missiles, collisions between submarines crewed by ill-trained conscripts and collisions with other craft all added to the list of catastrophes ending in Sunday's tragic but all too predictable disaster.

But as the world waits to hear the final fate of the crew of the Kursk, condemned perhaps to the cruellest of lingering deaths,

another and even more ominous tragedy awaits in the home base of K-141 at Archangel. In that port lie the decaying and dangerous hulks of Russia's abandoned nuclear submarine fantasy with their reactors leaking and unattended. Under the 1992 Co-operative Threat Reduction Programme, the United States is funding the dismantling of this potential nuclear time-bomb. At \$10 million per submarine, 18 will be cut up and rendered safe this year with another 107 to be dealt with by the end of the decade.

However, whatever the cause of the accident which sank the Kursk, be it a freak accident or a suspicious collision, it raises again the inability of the Russian nuclear submarine fleet to perform safely either for its crews or for the natural environment. Even if the ordeal of the crew of the Kursk ends in rescue, the nuclear hulk remaining at the bottom of the Barents Sea will only add to the environmental risks from Russian nuclear submarines.

If there is to be anything positive coming from the Kursk disaster, it has to be the need for Russia and the G7 western countries to intensify co-operation both in reducing the potential risks from the obsolete Soviet arsenal left over from the Cold War and in securing nuclear safety at sea. Russia has a land border with 18 other nations. It is essentially a land power with unresolved strategic defence interests around its perimeter, as last week's Moscow bomb underlined. Russia's sea dreams of the Cold War cost her precious resources and many brave men. The crew of the Kursk should be the last potential sacrifice to that folly.

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