

Herald?

Race to rescue crew from nuclear tomb

KEITH SINCLAIR

TIME was rapidly running out last night for more than 100 Russian crewmen entombed in a nuclear submarine stranded on the seabed in the Arctic Circle as rescuers in mini-subs circled the stricken vessel.

As oxygen levels on the 14,000-tonne Kursk dwindle, the 116 men could be facing death in less than 48 hours, according to defence experts, who said some may already be dead. The vessel has been trapped since Sunday.

Tass news agency said the small rescue submarines circling the Kursk had found it damaged but sitting straight on the seabed. It was reported that the rescuers had been able to exchange coded signals with the crew through the hull of the vessel.

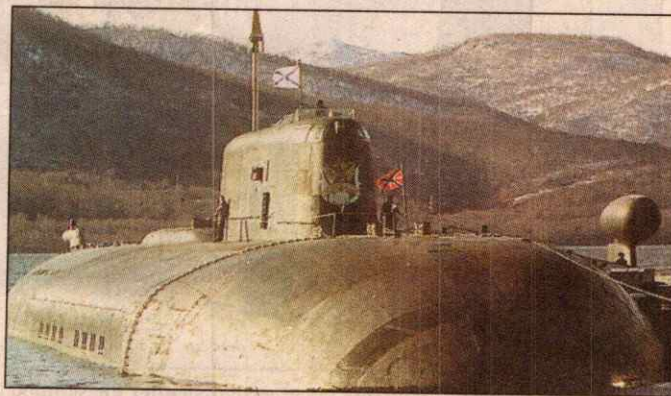
However, the weather had added to the difficulties for the rescuers. Conditions sharply worsened during the night, with heavy winds and choppy seas in the area.

There were conflicting reports on what had happened to the Kursk. The head of the Russian navy said the vessel was apparently damaged in a collision, possibly with a foreign submarine, during a major naval exercise.

However, Tass quoted a source from the defence company involved in the rescue as saying preliminary surveys ruled out a collision. The source raised the possibility of damage to the nose section being caused by an explosion. There was no explanation for such a blast but there was conjecture of a torpedo misfiring.

The Russian navy declined to say how far down the vessel was trapped, but a Norwegian report said it was more than 450ft, a depth at which it would be very difficult to carry out a rescue because of the water pressure.

The rescue fleet was last night over the spot where the vessel plummeted under the icy waters of the Barents Sea off Russia's Kola peninsula, but the Russian Navy admitted that the chances for the crew were "not high".



Nuclear weapon: an Oscar-class sub, the same type as the Kursk

Russian mini-vessels circle stricken submarine on ocean floor

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Ten rescue ships, including an aircraft carrier, were said to be at the scene. Another report said a diving bell had reached the stricken submarine and had pumped oxygen and fuel into it.

A team of ship designers was rushed to the area last night to help suggest ways to rescue the crew.

Both Britain and the US have offered help. Britain has put an LR5 deep search and rescue submarine on standby. The US can also recover submarines and crew from substantial depths, but it is believed their closest rescue platform could not arrive in less than a week.

The submarine's power failed

after the accident and it was believed to be running on batteries, to provide oxygen and heat, which would run out after 72 hours. No radio contact had been made.

If the submarine were involved in a collision that ruptured its hull, there could be a chance of radioactive leaks.

Russian navy spokesman Igor Dygalo said the Oscar-class submarine was not carrying any nuclear weapons and there was no immediate danger of radiation leaks or an explosion. He said the vessel's two nuclear reactors had been shut down, leaving the batteries as the only source of power and oxygen.

In an emergency, a submarine would surface if at all possible. But Mr Dygalo said the vessel was forced to descend to the ocean floor, indicating that the crew had lost control.

Mr Paul Beaver, of Jane's Defence Weekly, said the Russian Navy had the technical capability to rescue the men but claimed the problem was the variable state of their specialist equipment, which may affect the speed of the rescue. "It all depends how quickly they can react."

He added: "If they don't rescue them within the next 48 hours I don't think they will survive. Things are looking pretty grim."

The commander of the Russian navy, Admiral Vladimir Kuroyedov, said the 500ft-long, six-year-old

submarine had apparently been involved in a major collision. He said the damage sustained was serious.

One of the possibilities being examined was that the Kursk had collided with a foreign submarine. Russian and Western submarines sometimes play cat-and-mouse games in the area and have scraped each other in the past.

It later emerged that a US Navy electronic surveillance ship, the USNS Loyal, was operating in the Barents Sea at the time, but US officials would not say whether one of their submarines was in the area during the Russian naval exercise.

A Pentagon spokesman said: "We have no indication that a US vessel was involved in this accident."

US submarines normally monitor the movement of Russian submarines and it was even more likely in this case because of the size of the Russian naval exercise, which Pentagon officials had described as the largest of the year.

A Ministry of Defence spokesman said a Royal Navy submarine had "definitely not" been involved in the accident.

Meanwhile, anti-nuclear campaigners raised fears over the threat of environmental disaster in the wake of the accident.

CND spokesman Lionel Trippett said he was worried that if the vessel, which can carry up to 24 missiles, was left in the sea, it could corrode and lead to a gradual seepage of radioactive fluid into the ocean.

Vladimir Gundarov, a submarine specialist at Red Star, the official daily newspaper of the Russian military, said the crew may be able to use rescue capsules, but in a worst-case scenario would have to try to escape by swimming out through the torpedo tubes. "It is extremely risky, but they are all trained to do this," he said.

The Kursk is one of the newest in the Russian armada. Its role in wartime is to sink enemy aircraft carriers.