

Russians seek to prevent Arctic nuclear catastrophe

FROM MICHAEL BINYON IN OSLO

ANDREI KOZYREV, the Russian Foreign Minister, arrives in Oslo tomorrow for talks that may be decisive in showing how far Moscow will go in seeking Western help to avert a potential nuclear catastrophe in its decaying Arctic fleet.

Mr Kozyrev will brief Bjorn Godal, the Norwegian Foreign Minister, on Russia's plans to work with its Nordic neighbours in lessening the danger of massive nuclear contamination of the Barents Sea by its ageing submarines. He is also expected to endorse a rescue mission led by a British company which will start work in two weeks on making safe a decaying ship moored in Murmansk harbour that is filled with more than 500 old and damaged nuclear fuel rods.

His visit comes a week before Russia takes over the presidency of the Barents Council for the first time since its creation in 1993. The council, formalising co-operation between Russia, Norway, Sweden and Finland, offers Moscow unprecedented help in cleaning up the contamination of the Kola peninsula, home of Russia's Northern Fleet and containing the greatest concentration of ageing nuclear weapons and unstable nuclear reactors in the world.

Norwegian researchers estimate that only 30 miles from their northern frontier there is a concentration of nuclear waste that could emit a thousand times more radiation than the latest French nuclear test on Sunday. As well as 182 nuclear reactors in operation, there are 135 no longer in use and 15 waste storage sites on land and at sea. The amount dumped constitutes two-thirds of all radioactive waste ever dumped in all the oceans of the world. The main civilian nuclear power plant in the Kola peninsula is considered, after Chernobyl, the most unsafe in the world.

Mr Kozyrev, who represents Murmansk in the Duma, is under pressure from Scandi-

navia to agree to extensive Western monitoring of Russian proposals to dispose of nuclear warheads and reactors from 71 submarines laid up at bases in the Kola peninsula. There are fears that Moscow may either dump them at sea or cut them up without proper safeguards against radiation leaks.

Despite the sinking of the *Komsomolets*, a nuclear-powered submarine that caught fire, there has been relatively little radiation leakage. Norwegian monitoring has found that fish stocks are not endangered and most of the radiation has come from Sellafield, swept north by the Gulf Stream.

The test case will be the new agreement to use Western technical help in making safe the *Lepse*, the converted service ship used to store spent fuel from nuclear ice-breakers. Built in 1936, the old ship is moored in the busy Murmansk harbour where a collision could release huge amounts of radiation.

Russia postponed plans to fill the ship with concrete and dump it off the barren Novaya Zemlya island. Western companies tendered to remove the fuel using robots, and Britain's Atomic Energy Agency, together with the French SNG company, will begin initial work later this month. The case is seen as a test run by Moscow to find out whether it can invite similar help to deal with 15 other nuclear storage ships moored at the submarine base in Severomorsk.

Mr Kozyrev has encouraged an extraordinary new openness about the extent of Russia's problems in the Arctic, and in return is likely to reap more Western money to help this endangered part of the country than any other region.

□ **Kiev:** Ukraine asked Canada to put pressure on the Group of 7 leading industrialised countries to help it financially with the closure of Chernobyl. (Reuter)