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Race to save Russian submariners

In a race against the weather, a Russian rescue bell is tonight being sent down to the crippled nuclear submarine Kursk in the hope of rescuing the crew of 116 trapped inside.

The bell, attached to a surface rescue ship by an umbilical cord, is capable of carrying 12 people at a time.

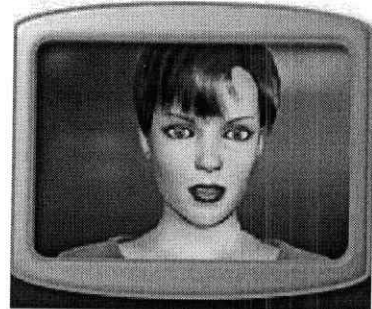
One problem facing the rescuers is the state of the 500 ft long, 14,000 ton Kursk, which is said to be lying at an angle of 60 degrees at the bottom of the Barents Sea, above the Arctic Circle.

The rescue plan involves attaching the Kolokol diving bell to one of the Oscar-class sub's escape hatches, allowing some of the trapped submariners to climb inside.

Rescue workers had failed to make contact with the submarine earlier today, and the chances of rescuing the crew appeared bleak as a storm lashed the area with 20ft high waves, strong winds and rain. Forecasts suggested bad weather would continue for the next three days.

Russian navy spokesman Captain Igor Babenko said efforts to connect air and power lines had not worked, despite earlier reports of success, and there was no communication with the submarine which has been trapped 325ft down on the sea-bed since Sunday.

Officials said conditions inside the submarine, including how much air it had left, were not known. They said there was no way to know if emergency air and light systems were working,



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and it appeared that water was getting in.

Navy chief Admiral Vladimir Kuroyedov said: "The projection of possible consequences of the accident in the Kursk for the lives of its crew remains extremely grave."

Admiral Kuroyedov said there appeared to have been an explosion in the torpedo compartment in the nose of the submarine, sending it crashing to the sea bottom. This contradicted earlier statements that it had collided with something.

Analysts say an explosion inside the torpedo chamber, which contains warheads, would probably have caused extensive casualties. And the Interfax news agency reported that navy officials said casualties could not be ruled out.

Last updated: 17:56 Tuesday 15th August 2000.

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