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Kursk wreath-laying cancelled



President Putin meets a dead sailor's relative

President Vladimir Putin has returned unexpectedly to the Kremlin after the cancellation of a ceremony for the 118 sailors who perished on the nuclear submarine Kursk.

The ceremony was abandoned apparently at the request of the relatives, who told Mr Putin at a heated meeting on Tuesday that they were unable to mourn until the bodies were brought up from the seabed.

Mr Putin's return to Moscow comes as Russia observes a national day of mourning for the submarine crew.

There are also unconfirmed reports of radioactive contamination a few kilometres from where the nuclear submarine sank.

Flags lowered

The Russian president had been expected to visit the scene of the accident to lay a wreath on the waves of the Barents Sea where the nuclear submarine sank on 12 August.

To mark the day of mourning, flags have been lowered on all government buildings,



Relatives called for the ceremony's cancellation



My heart hurts, but yours hurt even more

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Sub rescue team returns home

The BBC's James Coomarasamy in Murmansk

"Relatives say they can't mourn until bodies are brought up from the seabed"

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The BBC's Judith Moloney

"At midnight in Moscow the flag over the Kremlin was lowered to half mast"

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government buildings, and radio and television stations have replaced entertainment programmes with more sombre material.

more
Vladimir Putin

Mr Putin's meeting with sailors' relatives in Vid'yayevoy, near Murmansk, followed severe criticism of his leadership during the Kursk crisis.

"The grief is immeasurable, there are not enough words of comfort," Mr Putin told the relatives.

"My heart hurts, but yours hurt even more."

Tense occasion

Russian state television showed one of the relatives of the submariners in the audience venting her anger.

"When will we get them back, dead or alive?" she asked, referring to the bodies of the sailors. "Answer as the president."

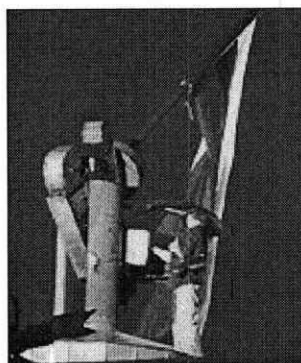
Mr Putin replied that he would tell her if he himself knew the answer.

A BBC correspondent in Murmansk, James Coomarasamy, said many people felt Mr Putin's visit to headquarters of the Northern Fleet came much too late.

He says the meeting with relatives lasted several hours, and was clearly a tense occasion.

Mr Putin is also reported to have criticised the state of the Russian navy's rescue equipment.

More than 500 relatives mourning the loss of sons, husbands and fathers converged on



A flag is lowered in St Petersburg

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Kursk timeline

12 Aug: Sinks during Barents Sea exercises
14 Aug: Russian navy inspects sub
15 Aug: Attempts to attach rescue capsule fail
16 Aug: Russians report no signs of life. Accept help from the West
17 Aug: British and Norwegian craft readied for rescue attempt
19 Aug: British and Norwegian teams arrive at scene
20 Aug: Norwegian and British divers examine Kursk
21 Aug: Divers enter flooded sub
22 Aug: President Putin arrives in Murmansk

fathers converged on the city as efforts to rescue the sailors dragged on unsuccessfully for nine days.

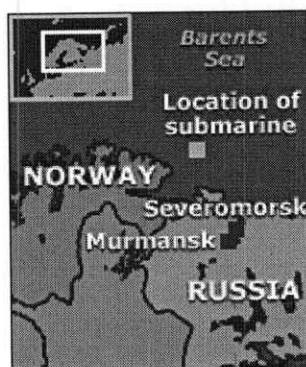
Murmansk

The Kursk rescue operation finally came to an end on Monday after a Norwegian-led team of divers forced open the submarine's rear escape hatch and found that the whole vessel was flooded.

Radiation watch

Russia's independent NTV on Wednesday reported an increase in radiation levels on the coast near the site where the Kursk went down.

"Experts are worried because the stream in the area of the submarine is taking the waters in the direction of the Murmansk port," the TV said.



But the head of the Russian navy's main headquarters, Admiral Viktor Kravchenko, said radiation levels in the area were normal.

"Military experts measure radiation levels every hour," he told the Interfax news agency.

Correspondents say there has been no independent confirmation of a rise in radiation levels.

An inquiry into the disaster will initially focus on examining the seabed around the wreck.

Russia has asked for international help to recover the bodies of the crew, and to raise the submarine to the surface.

The cause of the disaster is still unclear.

Russian officials say they believe the submarine may have collided with a Western submarine that was in the Barents Sea to monitor a large naval exercise in which the Kursk was taking part.

Western experts say the damage to the submarine appears to have been caused by a catastrophic explosion in the torpedo bay.