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Damaged nuclear sub 'poses threat to environment'

August 16, 2000

Web posted at: 10:12 AM EDT (1412 GMT)

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The Kursk in May at its home base in Zapadnaya Litsa, Kola Peninsula, near Murmansk

STOCKHOLM, Sweden -- While not the first incident in which a nuclear submarine has sunk, the impact on the local environment of the loss of the Kursk could make it the worst.

Although the immediate radiation threat from the Oscar-class vessel is believed to be minimal, environmentalists fear that the relative shallowness of the water it now rests in (about 350 feet, or 108 meters) makes it a long-term threat to the rich fishing grounds of the Barents Sea.

The Bellona Foundation, a Norwegian environmental group, says the worst case scenario is that, if abandoned, the Kursk's reactor could explode on the seabed, spreading radiation throughout the region.

Russian officials have said the Kursk was not carrying nuclear weapons and its two nuclear reactors have been switched off.

Norwegian government scientists have found no trace of radiation in air samples, but says it is difficult to gauge the danger since what happened to the ship was still unclear.

Threat to marine life

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Threat to marine life

The Norwegian Radiation Protection Authority said that measurements of the air across the Nordic region also continued to show no sign of fall-out from the accident, which happened on Saturday.

"We got the first...water samples during the night and they show no signs of radioactivity traceable to the submarine," Per Strand, a leader of the authority, told Reuters. "This was a very positive result."

"We have experience of sunken Russian reactors," he added, referring to the Komsomolets nuclear submarine which lies at a depth of 4,500ft off north west Norway.

The Komsomolets, which sank in 1989 following a fire which killed 42 crewmen, is slowly leaking plutonium, although the depth of the water means it is less of a threat to marine life than the Kursk.

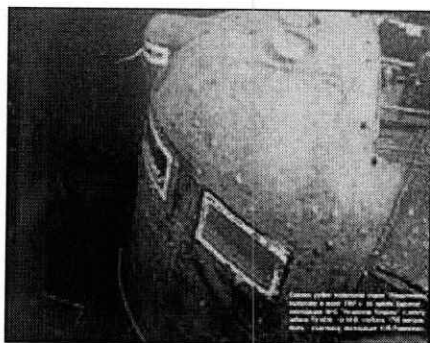
But Greenpeace says any possibility of radiation leakage was too much, and has demanded the Kursk be raised to the surface as soon as possible rather than just contained as other vessels have been.

"The Kursk adds another submarine and another reactor to the ocean bed," spokesman William Peden said.

"Even if there are no reactor leaks right now, there is the possibility that sometime in the future there could be a leak and this submarine's integrity is already threatened."

Nuclear submarine accidents

The Kursk, which has a crew of 116, is the latest in a long line of submarine accidents.



The Komsomolets sank in 1989

Of the five other nuclear submarines that have sunk since 1963, all have come to rest on the ocean floor at depths of over 4,500ft, far below where most marine life lives. Among them are two former Soviet submarines -- one that caught fire and sank east of Bermuda in 1986 and another that went down in the Bay of Biscay near Spain in 1970 -- which are both sitting at almost 16,000 feet (4,800 meters) below the surface, and two U.S. nuclear submarines -- the USS Thresher and USS Scorpion -- which sank in the 1960s at the height of the Cold War.

The Bellona group says there are also about 100 submarines -- with 52 still

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The Bellona group says there are also about 100 submarines -- with 52 still holding nuclear fuel -- rusting at ports on Russia's Kola Peninsula while 17 nuclear reactors have been dumped in the Kara Sea.

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