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Rescue mission for crippled Russian sub enters second day

August 15, 2000

Web posted at: 2:03 a.m. EDT (0603 GMT)

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MOSCOW (CNN) -- As rescue crews worked frantically Tuesday to save 116 Russian sailors trapped in a submarine at the bottom of the Barents Sea, U.S. authorities suggested the giant ship may have been in distress much longer than originally reported.

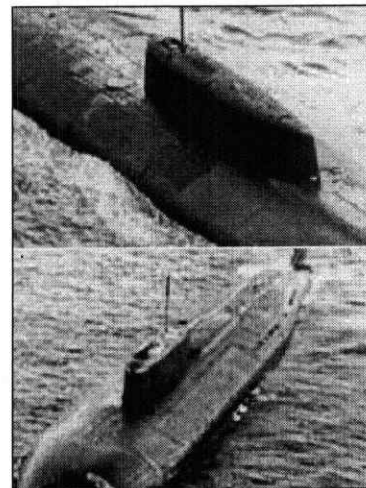
Working in bitter, Arctic weather, about a dozen ships as well as submarines and helicopters are taking part in the effort, now in its second day. The 14,000-ton Kursk, carrying more than 100 people, lies about 107 meters (350 feet) below the surface approximately 136 kilometers (85 miles) from the Russian naval base of Severomorsk.

Authorities say they are trying to maneuver a large diving bell against the Kursk to evacuate sailors. After hours of effort, however, no one had been brought to the surface.

The condition of the crew was unknown. After first saying it was in radio contact with the ship, the navy later acknowledged that there was only "acoustic contact," which could be the sound of the crewmen pounding on the hull.

"Despite all the efforts being taken, the probability of a successful outcome from the situation with the Kursk is not very high," said naval commander Admiral Vladimir Kuroyedov said.

Russian officials insist the submarine, which is



This image taken from video shows the Russian nuclear Oscar-class submarine Kursk in May at an unspecified location, according to NTV

VIDEO

CNN's Steve Harrigan reports on the attempt to save the lives of the Russian nuclear submarine crew trapped at the bottom of the Barents Sea



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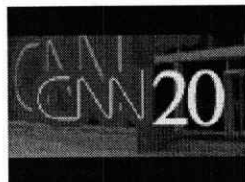
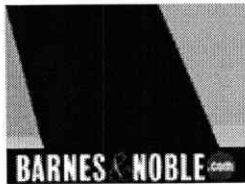
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Russian officials insist the submarine, which is powered by two nuclear reactors, plunged to the bottom on Sunday after a collision. A Clinton administration official, however, suggested late Monday the Kursk could have gone down as early as Saturday.

Two U.S. Navy submarines were operating in the Barents Sea over the weekend, and one reported hearing an explosion Saturday, said the official, who is familiar with U.S. intelligence reports on the matter.

"We have no indication that a U.S. vessel was involved in this accident," Pentagon spokesman Rear Adm. Craig Quigley said.

He declined, however, to say whether a U.S. submarine was in the area at the time of the accident.

Sub reported to be listing

What caused the Oscar-class submarine, which was launched in the mid 1990s, to sink is in dispute. At 154 meters (about 505 feet), the Kursk is one of the largest submarines in the world.

Kuroyedov said it was taking part in naval exercises off Russia's north coast when it was damaged in a "big and serious collision." It was not carrying nuclear weapons at the time, officials said.

But Russia's Itar-Tass news agency has reported that preliminary surveys have ruled out a collision as a cause of the disaster. It said its source was an official at a defense firm taking part in efforts to rescue the stricken submarine.

"He (the source) did not exclude the possibility that the damage to the nose section of the sub was caused by an explosion in that section," Tass said, adding that its source had not said what could have caused such a blast.

Russia's AVN military news agency said it was told by the Northern Fleet that the submarine was listing some 60 degrees to the port side.

The defense ministry at first reported that the Kursk went aground after torpedo tubes flooded during a training exercise.

U.S. ships lurked nearby

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CNN's Steve Harrigan describes the accident and possible rescue

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CNN's Steve Harrigan describes the rescue effort and provides details about the sub



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AUDIO

Paul Beaver of Jane's Defence Weekly assesses the situation

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A U.S. surveillance ship was conducting electronic and acoustic monitoring of the exercises from about 320 kilometers (200 miles) away and at least one U.S. submarine also was operating in the general vicinity of the largest Russian naval exercises of the year, according to officials.

While adamant that no U.S. ships could have been involved in a collision with the Kursk, Pentagon officials cautioned that they could not account for submarines or other ships belonging to European nations that may have been operating in the area.

The United States has offered to help the Russian government in its rescue efforts.

"At this point there's been no requests for our assistance," White House spokesman Joe Lockhart said. "We are following this closely, and if the Russians are in a position where they believe we can offer some assistance, we will do that."

Norwegian defense officials also said they were aware of the crisis, had a ship nearby and had offered assistance to the Russian Navy. The Norwegian Navy routinely monitors the movement of Russian vessels in the Barents Sea.

Evacuation a risky task

Standard rescue procedures call for the crew to be rescued using a "bell" or "capsule" which is lowered onto the hatch of the submarine.

Russian submarine crew members are trained to swim out of the torpedo tubes, but experts said if the sailors tried to swim to the surface they would run the risk of being killed by the extreme depth and the freezing Arctic temperatures.

Paul Beaver, a spokesman for Jane's military information group, told CNN: "At 300 to 500 feet, you can actually swim to the surface. It is very dangerous to do so, but it has been done by the British Royal Navy."

"It's not what you want to do, because it affects your lungs, your hearing, your eyes and whatever. It is possible to do a free escape as long as they've got the escape equipment."

"The other thing you can do is put another submarine across, a special rescue vessel -- it's called a DSRV, a deep submersible rescue vessel -- and pull of people perhaps say 24 at a time. That's possible. The Americans have that capability."

In 1989, the Russian Navy suffered another nuclear submarine disaster in the Barents Sea when the crew of the Komsomolets abandoned that vessel after a series of electrical fires broke out. A total of 42 Russian sailors died in that incident.



File photo of a similar Oscar-class nuclear submarine taken September 1999

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