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Russian rescuers lower submersible into sea in attempt to save submarine crew

August 15, 2000
Web posted at: 12:53 p.m. EDT (1653 GMT)

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Russian Navy spokesman Capt. Igor Dygalo speaks to press outside Navy Headquarters in Moscow on Tuesday

MOSCOW (CNN)-- Russian Navy rescuers lowered a submersible into the Barents Sea on Tuesday hoping to rescue the 116-member crew trapped in a nuclear submarine.

The submersible was due to drop into the sea from the Russian Navy ship Rudinsky at 7:00 p.m. local time (1500 GMT).

The head of the Russian Navy, Admiral Vladimir Kuroyedov, said the operation would take between six to eight hours to complete.

He said a submersible tethered to the Rudinsky on the surface would be lowered to the 14,000-ton Kursk, which is lying at an angle 107 meters (350 feet) beneath the surface of the Arctic waters of the Barents Sea, 136 kilometers (85 miles) from the Russian naval base of Severomorsk.

Kuroyedov said the plan was for the submersible to be lowered onto the surface of the submarine and then slipped along the hull to the escape hatch.

Oxygen running low

Initial accounts of the Kursk's accident indicated that the nuclear submarine had collided with another vehicle, but Kuroyedov said that a torpedo had exploded near the front of the ship causing the front section of the craft to flood.

The mammoth Kursk is one of the newest submarines in the Russian fleet, built in 1994 and commissioned in 1995. It was taking part

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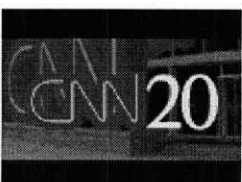
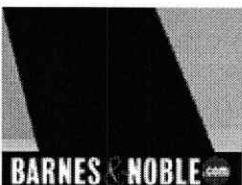
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and commissioned in 1995. It was taking part in naval exercises intended to demonstrate to the world a reinigorated Russian Navy.

The sections of the submarine are divided into compartments, but it was unclear how many of the crew had been able to escape to safer parts of the ship before the front of the submarine filled with water, forcing it onto the sea bottom.

When the submarine foundered, its two nuclear reactors were shut down, cutting off electrical power and raising fears that the crew would run out of oxygen.

Rescuers worked throughout Monday and overnight into Tuesday, trying to lower a diving bell onto the hatch of the submarine that would supply oxygen to the crew and lift survivors to the surface.

However, rough seas and the angle of the submarine rendered those rescue attempts a failure.

Communication stops

The Russian Navy official in charge of the rescue operation said communication with the submarine was lost. On Monday, rescuers aboard a flotilla of rescue ships -- now numbering 15 -- were able to talk to the crew by radio.

When radio contact deteriorated, communication was limited to members of the crew banging on the hull of the stricken vessel in code. Now, said Russian officials, even that had stopped, leaving rescuers to wonder how many of the 116 member crew were left alive.

"Our lack of knowledge about the fate of the crew has marked all our work," Kuroyedov said.

While Russian Navy officials said the incident occurred on Sunday, two U.S. Navy submarines operating in the area said they detected an explosion aboard the submarine on Saturday.

Russian officials said there were no nuclear weapons aboard the Kursk, adding that so far, no radiation leaks from the submarine's reactors had been detected.

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VIDEO

CNN's Mike Hanna takes a look at the rescue operation



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



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Paul Beaver of Jane's Defence Weekly assesses the situation

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