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Soviet nuclear vessel reported sunk in Norwegian Sea

Radiation fear over 'lost' sub

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and agencies

A SOVIET nuclear-powered submarine was believed to have sunk in the Norwegian Sea yesterday after a fire, prompting fears of a serious release of radioactivity.

The Norwegian Defence Minister, Mr Johan Joergen Holst, announced: "There is reason to believe the boat has sunk."

"It is clearly a very serious accident," Mr Holst said, adding that Norway, a Nato member, would be seeking information from the Soviet authorities. There was no comment from Moscow.

Mr Holst said on Norwegian Radio that there was reason to believe the crew had been rescued.

Mr Johan Baali, director of Norway's State Radiation Technology Board, said a fire on board could damage a reactor sufficiently to cause radioactive leaks. "It's too early to say, but in such a case, it could be a substantial amount [of radiation]," he told state radio.

The Norwegian Defence Ministry said many Soviet ships and aircraft were in the area of the submarine in international waters off the island of Spitzbergen.

Norwegian Air Force planes reported spotting liferafts around the stricken sub at about 4pm yesterday.

The vessel was the prototype of the Mike class of submarines, most deadly of the Soviet hunter-killer types, and is the quietest submarine the Soviet Navy has so far developed.

about 100 miles west-south-west of Bear Island, well inside the Arctic Circle at the approach to the Barents Sea.

Believed to be on its early sea trials, the Mike class submarine would normally carry a crew of 95, but it was not known how many were aboard when the accident took place.

The Mike submarine is not counted among the Soviet Union's ballistic missile fleet, but it is believed to be designed to be capable of carrying SS-N-21 missiles.

Pentagon sources would not rule out the presence of nuclear weapons aboard.

The Mike Class submarines first entered Soviet naval service in late 1984 and may have strong titanium hulls which allow them to dive deeply while withstanding the crushing ocean pressure. The boats are 361 feet long.

Arne Finne, spokesman for northern Norway's main rescue centre in the town of Bodoe, said Norway had offered assistance to the Soviet Arctic port of Murmansk.

The Soviet Union has 10 atomic-powered submarines in its huge northern fleet, based

around Murmansk on the Kola peninsula, according to Western defence experts. Norway and the Soviet Union share an Arctic border in the area.

"A number of the crew, we don't know how many, took to the boats and have been picked up by Soviet ships that went to the scene," Mr Holst said.

He said that if the ship had sunk, it was unlikely that it could withstand water pressure at the depths in the area but important parts of the reactors would probably be able to do so.

"The vessel would break up... but we think that the critical parts of the reactor can withstand much greater pressure." He said a crisis unit was meeting through the night to assess the radiation danger.

According to Mr William Arkin, a specialist on nuclear weaponry with the Institute for Policy Studies in Washington, the Soviet navy has suffered more than 200 serious accidents with submarines since 1975.

While stressing he had no idea whether the Mike submarine's nuclear reactor had been involved in the accident, Mr Arkin said that particular technology was inherently very dangerous. "This sub carries two liquid metal cooled reactors; you are literally using molten metal, probably sodium," Mr Arkin said.

"It is a more efficient means of propulsion than using steam water, but it is very dangerous and very difficult to operate. We tried it once and gave up because we considered it too volatile. So if it was a real incident, it could be catastrophic."

This accident represents a setback for Soviet hopes of producing quiet soviet attack submarine

