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Guardian

# Soviet nuclear sub on fire

David Pallister

**A**NUCLEAR powered Alpha-class Soviet submarine was reported to be on fire last night about 75 miles east of Norway's easternmost town of Vardoe.

The distressed ship was sighted by Norwegian observers about 5 pm, the Norwegian defence ministry said in a statement. It is the third accident in the Soviet Union's ageing submarine fleet in the past four months.

The ship was smoking close to the tower, but was receiving assistance from other Soviet vessels, the statement said. The incident was in the Barents Sea north of the Kola Peninsula, home of the Soviet Northern Fleet.

"The smoke indicated fire on board. The submarine is assisted by a Soviet tug and there are other naval vessels in the area," the ministry said. "The

situation does not seem to be dramatic."

It was not immediately known whether the submarine's nuclear reactors were damaged or whether the ship carried nuclear weapons.

"Information has been relayed to the foreign ministry, which will raise the question of possible radiation danger with Soviet authorities," the statement said.

The Alpha-class submarine has twin nuclear reactors, cooled by liquid metal. Both its torpedoes and its SS-N-15 missiles could be nuclear-armed or conventional. The northern fleet has five Alpha-class submarines.

Weighing almost 3,000 tonnes, they are known for their speed and strength and use titanium to reinforce the hulls so that they can dive deeper to avoid detection.

A foreign ministry spokesman, Mr Oeyvind Nordsletten, said Oslo was making immedi-

ate contact with Soviet authorities.

In April, an experimental Mike class submarine caught fire and sank in the Norwegian Sea. In June, an Echo class nuclear powered submarine carrying nuclear weapons surfaced off the north Norwegian coast after its reactor broke down.

The two incidents concentrated attention on the poor safety record of the Soviet fleet. A few days before the Mike accident, a Soviet submarine captain, based at Northern Fleet's headquarters in Murmansk, wrote in a trade union paper that many crew were so poorly trained that "they know and can cope with only 30 to 50 per cent of what they should be capable of handling".

A recent report by Greenpeace on nuclear submarine accidents said that fires on Soviet vessels were "far above the norm in proportion to their numbers".

## ANGER AT A-SUB SILENCE

NORWAY, apparently faced with the third fire in four months on a Soviet nuclear submarine off its coast, is angry at Moscow's initial silence and puzzled by later claims there was no blaze.

Nato member Norway said yesterday fire had broken out on an Alpha-class attack submarine in the Barents Sea.

A Norwegian intelligence-gathering vessel claimed spotting the submarine, smoke billowing from its conning-tower and under tow.

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