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By MARTIN HILL

NORTHERN Ireland faces an ecological disaster of unprecedented proportions if nuclear submarine activity in the Irish Sea is allowed to continue, it was claimed last night.

The warning came only 72 hours after a Soviet Mike-class nuclear submarine sank in Arctic waters off the coast of Norway with a loss of 42 lives — sparking fears of radioactive contamination from its two plutonium reactors.

The Celtic League, an Isle of Man-based monitoring group, listed a catalogue of four serious incidents off the Irish coast involving American nuclear submarines over the past six years.

● In August 1983 the USS Raeburn was reported to be leaking radiation after a collision off the south-west coast of Eire — less than a month after it returned "hot" from an incident in the Baltic Sea.

● The following July, another American Lafayette-class submarine had to be towed back to base after its propeller failed off the east coast of the Isle of Man.

● One month later, the USS Nathaniel Greene — pow-

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ered by two nuclear reactors and carrying 16 plutonium warheads — suffered a broken propeller shaft and had to be towed back to its base at Faslane in Scotland.

● In April 1986 the same boat had to be decommissioned after it "bottomed" on the sea bed at 27-30 knots and tore a gaping hole in its pressure hull.

Submarines are also believed to be behind the sinking of 17 fishing vessels in the area — often with all hands — since 1981.

● In February 1985 the Mhari L disappeared with all hands off the Co Down coast — 24 hours before a damaged sub returned to Faslane for repairs.

● In May 1987 a submarine was in near collision with two car ferries when it surfaced off Larne Harbour.

● Between March 1-7 this year, the Girl Fiona disappeared with its crew of two in the Mull-Islay area.

● On March 5 this year, a Belgian fishing boat, the Thijl Uilenspiegel, disappeared in good weather with five crew on board.

Many more vessels have been towed for miles and had their gear destroyed when their nets were snagged by submarines.

Celtic League spokesman Bernard Moffatt, speaking from his home in Peel, Isle of Man, last night said the recent sinking of the Soviet nuclear submarine highlighted once again the dangers posed by the continued operation of such craft in the Irish Sea.

It was "potential carnage" for American submarines of 5,000 tonnes to operate in depths of as little as 150 ft — the Soviet submarine had been operating in waters 1500 ft deep off northern Norway when it sank, he said.

"In a shallow and confined area such as the Irish or Celtic sea the break-up of a nuclear sub would be an environmental nightmare which would pollute the seas for decades."

Greenpeace, the environmental pressure group, said the danger posed by nuclear submarines was now greater than that of nuclear power stations.

Spokesman Damian Gerrant said there were now 24 American submarines operating from Holy Loch in Scotland — as well as British, French and Russian boats.

"There are now 544 underwater nuclear reactors on submarines around the world — that's more than half the world's reactors."

"This is the sixth submarine to be lost in this way — and in prime flounder, shrimp, cod and herring spawning grounds. This problem isn't just going to go away."

Mr Gerrant said any fissionable products which were released from the Soviet vessel's reactor would include elements, plutonium, radium and radioactive iodine among them, with "half-lives" — the time it takes to lose half its radioactivity — of 24,000 years.

"If the reactors leak radioactivity it will get into the food chain — first through the bottom-feeding fish such as flounder and then the top-feeders and ultimately man — we are facing a ticking environmental bomb."

"If the coolant comes into contact with sea water at that depth — 200 atmospheres — the sub will implode and spread the radioactive contamination."