

MASSIVE EXPLOSION ON RUS SUB

A HUGE explosion tore through a blazing Russian submarine before it sank off the Norwegian coast.

And the number of dead could well be higher than the twelve originally assumed.

A spokesman for the Norwegian Defence Ministry said, "We know now that there was a powerful explosion on board after the fire spread and the vessel began to list."

"There is much to indicate that the number of dead was higher than first thought—though we do not have an exact figure."

Moscow has confirmed that the submarine sank on Friday with loss of life and that its reactor was shut down.

But it has given no casualty figures. The Norwegian spokesman also confirmed the sub was a Mike class submarine, a unique vessel used to test weapons systems.

Between 40 to 50 people appeared to have escaped before the sub sank.

Death Toll May Rise Amid Radiation Fears

But it was uncertain how many survived injuries and exposure.

The submarine would normally carry a crew of 95.

Norwegian authorities were yesterday searching for evidence of radioactivity, a coast-guard ship collecting samples of surface water for analysis.

President Gorbachev told the Norwegians the sub's nuclear reactor had been shut down and there was no danger of meltdown or radiation leakage.

But Western military experts in Moscow said that, if there were nuclear weapons on board, pressure from sea water could make them implode, causing a radioactive leak.

Moscow has not confirmed if the sub was carrying nuclear weapons.

The submarine's crew fought flames for several hours before the vessel sank in 5000 feet of water 180 km south-west of Bear Island.

A Soviet warship arrived at the disaster area

three hours later, then several other ships arrived.

Moscow says specialists have been sent to the area to assess the situation.

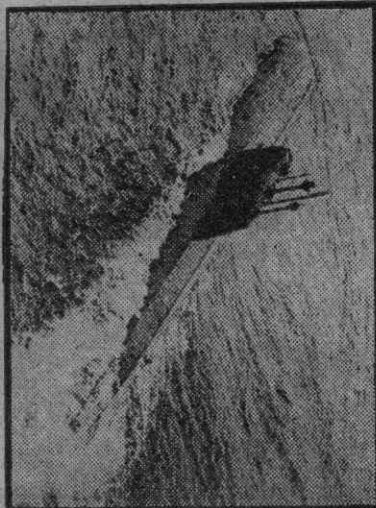
But the Norwegian Foreign Minister criticised the Soviet Union for its failure to inform Norway quickly enough.

Meanwhile, in Washington, Pentagon officials said the US would contact the USSR to see whether efforts were needed to prevent the possible spread of nuclear waste from the sunken vessel.

WESTERN INTELLIGENCE and Defence experts say the submarine was almost certainly the only one in the Mike class.

One source said, "That sub is almost certainly in small pieces by now—and the Soviets may have lost a key element in their development of subsea technology."

A naval expert said, "The Soviets only built one Mike submarine, so if they lost it they will not be able to replace it easily."



■ The Russian 'Mike' submarine

THE ACCIDENT has once again raised fears about submarine activity off Scotland's coast. It's known that the Soviets keep a permanent submarine force in the approaches to the Clyde estuary to monitor the movements of subs from Holy Loch and Faslane bases. The submarines are nuclear-powered and it's likely they are carrying nuclear warheads. The sinking is the eighth such incident involving a Soviet submarine in 26 years. None has occurred off the Scottish coast, but the threat of an accident here is high because of the extent of submarine activity.

Could It Happen Here?

According to Defence expert Malcolm Spaven, of the Arms and Disarmament unit at the University of Sussex, the Soviets are involved in an underwater game of cat and mouse with British and American submarines leaving the Clyde.

"There's little doubt that the Russians have a virtually permanent presence off the Scottish coast."

"The MoD won't give information about it, but there are occasional incidents that show that they are there."

"In the early 80s, extra Sea King helicopters were called to Prestwick to search for a Soviet sub in trouble off the Scots coast."

The Soviet submarines stay outside British territorial waters, and are mostly grouped round Malin Head, north of Ulster.

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