

AN accident which crippled a Soviet nuclear-powered submarine yesterday off the Norwegian coast has triggered an angry response from the Norwegian government, which said Moscow had not informed it of the problem until eight hours later.

Defence minister Johan Holst told reporters Norway should have been cautioned immediately of the accident. "It is unsatisfactory for us as a neighbouring state not to be warned."

The Soviet defence minister, Dmitri Yazov, said yesterday the submarine, which began billowing smoke after a burst pipe led to one of its reactors breaking down, presents no ecological danger.

"The radiation situation is normal, people are safe," he told the government newspaper *Izvestia* as two Soviet support ships pumped water on to the a 1960s-era Echo II class submarine to cool the damaged reactor.

The commander of the Soviet navy, Vladimir Chernavin, confirmed yesterday there were nuclear weapons on board. He told Soviet television that the weapons themselves were in a safe condition and had been unaffected.

He added, however, that

serious problems could arise if the weather worsened during the three days it would take the submarine to reach port.

"If the weather worsens, then this can have an effect both on the crew and the submarine, but there is no indication so far," he told a television interviewer.

The accident early yesterday was the third involving a Soviet vessel off Norway in the past three months, including a Soviet liner hitting an iceberg last Tuesday.

Mr Holst said that, following a Norwegian request for information, the Soviets had cabled Norway's Moscow

embassy saying that there was a break due to fatigue in the first chamber of the reactor... which has been shut down. The ship declined offers of help because "there are several Soviet vessels in the vicinity," the cable said.

Yesterday the submarine was limping on the surface through Arctic waters toward its home base on auxiliary power at a speed of four knots. Mr Yazov said a Soviet ship was headed for the submarine and would tow it to its home base in Severomorsk, north of Murmansk on the Kola peninsula.

The accident — which follows

a more serious one involving another Soviet submarine off Norway on 7 April — happened when the submarine was 210 miles south of Norway's Bear Island. The main power-generating unit was subsequently shut down.

"When two such incidents happen so close together we cannot help but feel uneasy about these vessels close to our waters. If there are operational problems with nuclear powered submarines carrying nuclear weapons, then we are uneasy," said Mr Holst.

Mr Yazov said preliminary information indicated the tube

of the reactor's first loop broke, losing its airtightness. He did not elaborate, but said the accident happened while the vessel was submerged. "The commander of the submarine, Captain Second Class Kasarkin, ordered emergency surfacing after which the ship continued on additional engines. The crew was not hurt."

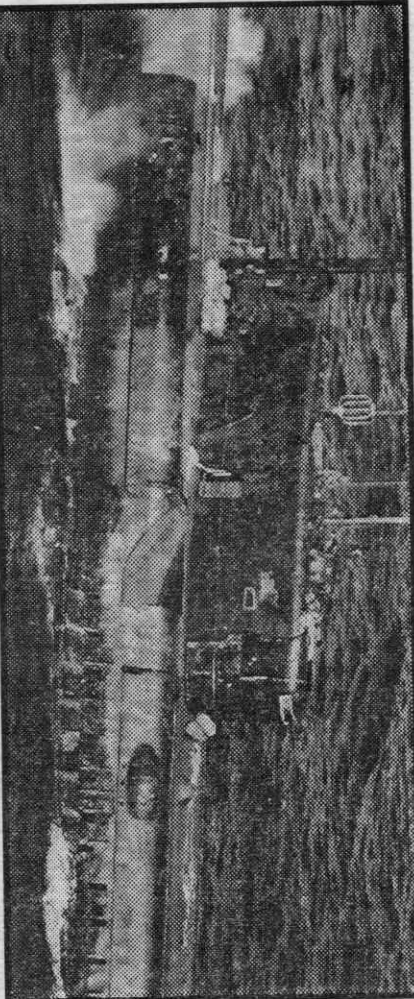
The accident was first reported by the Norwegian news agency NTB after a Norwegian F-16 jet reported seeing smoke coming from the submarine.

Norwegian authorities said there had been a fire on board and that the vessel was still billowing smoke. But a Soviet spokesman said, "There was no fire as such. It was a breakdown."

Mr Yazov said a technical commission would be established to investigate the cause of the accident.

Mr Holst said Norway will carry out tests on air and water samples of the region, to be completed today. Arne Bull, of Norway's Committee for Nuclear Accidents in Peace-time, said a list of questions would be submitted to Moscow asking for details of the submarine's reactor.

A close-up of the burning Soviet submarine off the coast of Norway yesterday



Naval officer attacks poor nuclear training standards

A SOVIET naval officer said only days before yesterday's accident that crews operating nuclear power units in the submarine fleet were poorly trained and often ignorant of basic procedures.

In a letter published in the trade union journal *Smena* the officer, Capt V Ovchinnikov, also said political education lectures, compulsory for officers and ratings, were far better organised than technical training.

"It will probably surprise you if I say that the nuclear installations on our submarines are operated by people who

are insufficiently trained and some not trained at all," he wrote. "But we still go on sailing. The crews operating the nuclear power units know and can cope with only 30 to 50 per cent of what they should know."

Capt Ovchinnikov, a captain-third rank, or equivalent in Western navies, sent his letter from Murmansk headquarters of the Soviet Union's Northern Fleet to which the vessel stricken in yesterday's accident belongs. But there was no immediate way of establishing whether he

was serving on the submarine involved in the latest incident.

"The reasons (for the poor training) do not lie in intellectual capacities but in the training system," he wrote. "But to go in for some self-criticism, I must also admit that pure idleness also plays a role."

He said political education in the fleet was an example of top-class organisation. "Everyone knows that political classes are a sacred thing and no-one dares to pull a sailor off them because he knows he'll have to explain

himself to the political officer. It would be great if specialist training were treated the same way."

Capt Ovchinnikov said many officers were conscientious but were swamped with paperwork and became bitter when they realised that, despite long hours, they earned no more than Soviet civilians working only a 40-hour week.

"We are always, for some reason or other, catastrophically busy, never manage to cope with the volume of work and are in a constant state of worry. Our heads swim from paperwork." — Reuter