

Submarine wreck 'nuclear timebomb'

THE SOVIET submarine disaster has left the world with a nuclear timebomb, the environmental organisation Greenpeace claimed yesterday.

Dismissing as irrelevant first reports by Norwegian scientists that no radiation was released from the vessel after it sank in the Norwegian Sea on Friday, killing 42 crewmen, a Greenpeace spokesman said it was only a matter of time before the shielding surrounding the submarine's twin nuclear reactors gave way.

"It is being suggested the reactors are going to remain firmly encased in their protective material. That is absurd," said Damian Durrant, of Greenpeace's Nuclear Free Seas Campaign.

"Let's say they are lying there and, thank God, haven't broken open. How long before they start to corrode? In the first year the amount of radioactivity would go down by 30 per cent. After that time it would hardly decrease at all. You can imagine it as an environmental timebomb lying on the ocean bed."

Mr Durrant said the Soviet statement that the reactors were shut down before the sinking missed the point. The potential for radioactive contamination came from

By JAMES MEEK

by-products like plutonium which had been produced by the reactors while they were operating.

Greenpeace yesterday wrote to the Soviet president, Mikhail Gorbachev, asking him to provide them and the International Atomic Energy Commission with details of the type of reactors on board the submarine so they could assess the hazard they posed. They also urged the Soviet Union to try to recover the reactors from the seabed.

The figure of 42 casualties out of a total crew of 69 was given by the Soviet authorities for the first time yesterday in a statement from the official news agency, Tass. The statement also detailed the submarine's nuclear armament — two nuclear torpedoes, designed to withstand extremely high water pressures.

The vessel sank on Friday afternoon 300 miles north-west of Norway when a five-hour battle by its crew to contain a fire ended in an explosion. Soviet ships and aircraft rushed to the scene but were only able to rescue 27 men.

Norwegian scientists worked through the weekend to analyse air, surface and deep water samples collected from the accident zone. Anne Alvik, head of Norway's Committee of Radiation Accidents, said they had found "no indication there has been any radioactive leakage". Permanent monitoring equipment will be placed near the sunken submarine to keep radiation levels under surveillance for years.

The accident happened more than 1,000 miles north of Shetland. A spokesman for the Department of Agriculture and Fisheries for Scotland said, "It's extremely unlikely anything would work its way into Scottish waters, given the circulation of the currents, but nevertheless we will be finding out from the Norwegians what they are doing."

Naval experts agree the submarine's hull will have been breached by the immense water pressure where it lies — about 4,500 feet down.

The Soviet authorities' claim, which the British and American governments seem to have accepted, is that the reactors are sufficiently well shielded not to leak even in such deep water.

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ATOM SCARE: COUNCIL TO BUY MONITOR

DUMBARTON District Council plans to purchase its own radiation monitoring equipment.

The Environmental Health Committee agreed to purchase a £200 Geiger Counter . . . despite opposition from Tory leader Councillor Norman Glen.

Clr Glen said he felt it was "unnecessary" since "the job is being done anyway."

But committee convener Clr Les Roberson said he did not accept official figures released by the MoD following the recent atom scare alert at Coulport.

REFUSED

Clr Roberson said: "It is worthwhile the District Council purchasing a Geiger counter so that our own officials can monitor radiation levels."

He added: "The MoD has refused to come across with information regarding the levels. We must have some way of monitoring these ourselves. It would then enable us to argue with the MoD figures."

Clr Roberson said that if the portable machine is purchased, en-

By HAZEL CHALMBERS

vironmental health staff would be trained in its use. He said: "It is just a counter for measuring. There is nothing sophisticated about it."

Clr Roberson also expressed concern over the amount of time that elapsed before the public were warned that pregnant women and children particularly should avoid drinking milk following the Chernobyl nuclear disaster.

He said: "If we have this equipment, we will be able to monitor levels when we want to and as quickly as we should."

Meanwhile, the District Council is demanding a meeting with the Property Services Agency to obtain an update on the asbestos removal operation at Faslane.

Clr Roberson said that contracts due to be awarded had been delayed because the exercise has proved larger than envisaged.

He added that this could mean more asbestos has been found. He said: "They have already enlarged the area of the dump in case more asbestos was discovered during excavation."

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MP calls for Base health checks

LOCAL MP John McFall is calling for a full health screening of all the 7,500 naval and civilian workers at the Clyde Submarine Base at Faslane.

His demand follows the publication of the Gardner report which claims there could be a link between leukaemia and fathers who work in the nuclear industry.

Last week, Dr Roger Berry, the doctor in charge of health at Sellafield's nuclear power plant, told workers there that if they are worried about leukaemia, they should not have a family.

Mr McFall's call is backed by Dumbarton District Council who have asked the Scottish Home and Health Department and Argyll and Clyde Health Board for a full health study to be carried out.

The move was at the instigation of Labour Leader Councillor Les Robertson who said that "people needed to know the truth and fears had to be allayed" and was

unanimously accepted by the council.

Last Thursday, 30 nuclear submarine maintenance department workers attended a private meeting with MoD officials to discuss the contents of the Gardner report.

The findings of the report were explained by the senior naval medical officer.

A ministry spokeswoman declined to provide any further details of the meeting.

She said: "It was a private meeting arranged by the head of the maintenance department for workers in his department who would be particularly concerned about the report."

"It was arranged to allay any fears that may have arisen as a result of the report."

The workers' wives were also invited to the meeting but none attended.