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Thursday August 17 8:33 AM ET

Explosion May Have Hit Russian Sub



AP Photo

By *BARRY RENFREW, Associated Press Writer*

MOSCOW (AP) - Underwater rescue capsules fighting to reach 118 seamen trapped on a Russian nuclear submarine failed again Thursday as new evidence suggested a massive explosion shattered large areas of the vessel and many sailors had no time to escape.

Navy officials said there were no signs of life on the vessel, but some of the crew could still be alive. Rescue capsules trying to link up with the submarine for the past three days were again driven back Thursday by racing currents and swirling sand in the inky darkness on the sea bottom.

Prime Minister Mikhail Kasyanov said Thursday the situation was "close to catastrophic," according to Russian news reports.

British and Norwegian rescue teams heading for the scene by ship were not expected to arrive until Saturday, raising fears they would be too late. The navy has given contradictory estimates of how long the Kursk's oxygen could last, but some officers say air generators may have been destroyed when the submarine slammed into the sea bed last Saturday.

Top navy and government officials met Thursday to review the rescue effort and study new approaches, but officials gave no details. The committee would consider how to use a British mini-submarine being rushed to the scene, Russian news agencies reported.

Film of the submarine being studied Thursday showed massive damage reaching from the front to the conning tower that would have sent the vessel crashing to the bottom in seconds, navy officials said. The control room where most of the crew work is below the tower, suggesting many sailors had no time to escape when the submarine went down.

"The accident happened so quickly we can say it was like a flash," said

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- [Project 949: Oskar-I/II class](#) includes basic characteristics specifications on the type of submarine involved in the incident, and a list of similar in operation. From the Russi Center for Arms Control, En and Environmental Studies.
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"The accident happened so quickly we can say it was like a flash," said navy spokesman Capt. Igor Dygalo.

U.S. submarines monitoring Russian navy exercises when the Kursk was lost detected two explosions at the time, according to Russian press reports. The second explosion was much larger than the first, the reports said.

The Russian navy refused to confirm the reports, but officers have said an explosion in the torpedo compartment at the front of the submarine apparently caused the Kursk to sink. A likely scenario was that one torpedo exploded, setting off a much bigger explosion in the compartment which is packed with torpedoes.

The Kursk can carry up to 28 torpedoes and anti-submarine missiles, each with warheads weighing up to 1,000 pounds. An explosion involving even a few torpedoes would have caused catastrophic damage, officers said.

The damage apparently included the submarine's internal escape capsule located in the conning tower, making it impossible to use, Dygalo said.

Defense Minister Igor Sergeyev said authorities were still investigating the possibility of a collision.

After insisting for days that Western aid was not needed, the Russian government asked Britain and Norway to for help. Two Norwegian ships on Thursday were taking divers and the British mini-submarine to the rescue area.

The Russian turnabout apparently came after President Vladimir Putin spoke with President Clinton on Wednesday and ordered his Navy to seek help.

Russian officials refused to say Thursday why the British mini-sub was not flown to a Russian airfield closer to the rescue site. A Russian plane transported the mini-sub from Britain to Norway.

But British and Norwegian officials rejected suggestions that Russia was not eager for Western help. Britain's Defense Ministry said "the Norway option provided the quickest and safest way of getting our equipment to the scene."

The navy Thursday raised the number aboard the Kursk to 118 from 116 without explanation.

The rescue capsules are trying to latch onto one of the Kursk's hatches. The effort was being frustrated by the strong currents and almost zero visibility.

Four Russian rescue capsules were taking turns to try to reach the Kursk, each spending up to five hours submerged. The navy angrily denied Russian press reports that the rescue crews were failing because

that includes a rotational view of the sub superimposed on a U football field for scale.

- [Bellona Foundation](#) - include news on the rescue operation information about hazards the Kursk may pose.

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denied Russian press reports that the rescue crews were failing because they were poorly trained.

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Success of the rescue operation is dependent not only on latching on to a hatch but also on whether survivors can open it from inside. Submarine hatches can only be opened from the inside to prevent intruders.

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