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2 Submarines Reach Bottom of Lake Baikal

By Unknown

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The Mir-2 submarine being lowered into the waters of Lake Baikal during a test run of a diving expedition last week. **Zorikto Dagbaev**

Two small, manned submarines reached the bottom of Lake Baikal, the world's deepest freshwater lake, on Tuesday in a show of Moscow's resurgent ambitions to set new records in science.

The Mir-1 and Mir-2 submersibles descended 1,680 meters to the bottom of the vast Siberian lake in a mission led by Artur Chilingarov, a scientist and State Duma deputy who was part of an earlier mission to the North Pole that sparked criticism in the West.

Tucked away in the remote hills of southeast Siberia, where Russia borders China and Mongolia, Lake Baikal is home to some of the world's rarest types of fish and other water life.

The mission's twin submersibles -- used last year to plant a Russian flag on the North Pole

seabed -- slipped into the choppy waters just after dawn Tuesday and descended 1,680 meters to the lake's deepest point.

Organizers initially said the expeditions set a world record for the deepest descent in a freshwater lake, but Chilingarov later said no such record was broken Tuesday, Interfax reported.

Each of the bright-red Mir-1 and Mir-2 crafts carried three scientists.

The scientists will take samples of water and soil from the lake, which is home to more than 1,700 species of plants and animals. They also will plant a small pyramid bearing the Russian flag in the lake bed.

Mission chief Anatoly Sagalevich said the mission will make a total of 60 dives. Organizers then will compile a list of recommendations on how best to preserve Lake Baikal, a UNESCO World Heritage site.

Russia used Chilingarov's mission to the North Pole to stake a symbolic claim to the energy riches of the region, believed to hold vast resources of oil and natural gas that are expected to become more accessible as climate change melts the ice cap.

Canada at the time mocked the expedition and accused Moscow of behaving like a 15th-century explorer.

Reuters, AP

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