

Nuclear Submarine 'Handed Over' to India

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A new nuclear-powered submarine was handed over to India on a 10-year lease, two years after an accident during testing killed 20 people, news reports said Friday.

The Nerpa, under the command of an Indian crew, left its base on Russia's Pacific coast last week bound for an Indian naval base, Interfax reported, citing a source in Russia's military-industrial complex.

Citing a source in Russia's Pacific Fleet, RIA-Novosti said the submarine was manned by a mixed Russian-Indian crew.

Another RIA-Novosti report, citing the plant that built the Nerpa, said the submarine had not yet been officially handed over to India. It said the Indian crew was only training aboard the Nerpa at sea.

The Defense Ministry and Navy could not be immediately reached for comment. The press service of the Pacific Fleet declined to give details.

Construction of the Nerpa began in 1993, but the submarine was only launched and started sea trials in 2008 because of the piecemeal funding of its construction. In November 2008, the submarine was on sea trials when its fire extinguishing system switched on unexpectedly. Twenty people died after inhaling the toxic gas used as a fire suppressant, authorities said.

The accident was the deadliest to hit the Navy since 2000, when the Kursk nuclear submarine sank in the Barents Sea, killing all 118 sailors on board.

Quoting its source in the fleet, RIA-Novosti said that since January, the Nerpa had made a voyage to the Kamchatka Peninsula, after which the plant that built it and other specialists "reduced its underwater noise to a minimum."

The source also said the vessel's deep underwater maneuverability had been improved. "After the nuclear submarine was brought in line with all Western standards, a submarine crew arrived from India," the source said.

India, Russia's close economic and political partner since Soviet days, accounted for a quarter of Moscow's arms exports last year, according to estimates by the Center for Analysis of Strategies and Technologies, a Moscow-based defense think tank.

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