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18 ‘dead’ in Indian submarine explosion

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MUMBAI: India’s navy said all 18 sailors on board a submarine which exploded and sank on Wednesday are feared dead, and admitted the incident had left a “dent” in the country’s defences.

The fully-armed INS Sindhurakshak, returned by original manufacturer Russia earlier this year after a major refit, exploded in flames in Mumbai shortly after midnight Wednesday and sank in a military shipyard.

The disaster is thought to be the Indian navy’s worst since the sinking of a frigate by a Pakistani submarine in 1971. Defence Minister AK Antony described the explosion as the “greatest tragedy in recent time”. “I feel sad about those navy personnel who have lost their lives in service of the country,” he told reporters in New Delhi.

Chief of naval staff DK Joshi said no sign of life had been detected on board even after divers managed to enter through the main hatch in a bid to refloat the vessel. “While we hope for the best, we have to prepare for the worst,” he told reporters in Mumbai, adding that there was a possibility some crew might have found air pockets but “the indicators are negative”.

“It is certainly a dent on Indian navy’s submarine capabilities for the time being,” he added. The blast came days after New Delhi trumpeted the launch of its first domestically-produced aircraft carrier and the start of sea trials for its first Indian-made nuclear submarine. The Indian navy has 14 submarines, but only between seven and nine are operational at any one time because of regular repair and refitting operations.

Amateur video footage showed a fireball in the forward section of the Sindhurakshak, where torpedoes and missiles are stored as well as the battery units. “There were two to three explosions and the night sky lit up briefly,” eyewitness Dharmendra Jaiswal told AFP. afp