

# Mass murder in the Indian Ocean: The torpedoing of the IRIS Dena

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*The World Socialist Web Site is holding an emergency global webinar this Sunday, March 8, at 3:00 p.m. EDT to explain the origins of the US imperialist war against Iran, the social forces driving it and the strategy required to stop it. We urge all our readers to register to attend.*

The United States Navy's torpedoing of the unarmed Iranian frigate IRIS Dena in the Indian Ocean on March 4, 2026 is a war crime. For all the "warrior" braggadocio of the arguably deranged "secretary of war," it will be remembered in naval history as an act that was as cowardly as it was vicious. This crime will take its place alongside the 1988 shooting down of an Iranian commercial airliner by the USS Vincennes, which killed 290 innocent people. In fact, in both method and execution, the destruction of the Iranian vessel continues on a larger scale the recent targeted killings of defenseless fishermen in waters off the coast of Latin America.

In this case, a submarine of the most powerful military force in the world snuck up on an isolated vessel posing no threat to anyone, gave no warning, offered no opportunity for surrender, and sent more than 140 sailors to the bottom of the Indian Ocean. Pete Hegseth, a Christian fascist who believes that he is an instrument of Armageddon, then walked to a podium at the Pentagon and boasted about it.

The Trump administration has not offered a single word of justification. It has not attempted to identify the legal basis of this killing. It has not claimed self-defense. It has not alleged that the IRIS Dena was engaged in hostile action. It has not argued proportionality, military necessity or imminent threat. It has offered nothing—because it does not believe that anything is required. So much for the "rules-based order" about which the US has been lecturing everyone for the last three decades. What has replaced it is the naked assertion that the United States may kill whomever it wishes, wherever it wishes, whenever it wishes and that the act of killing is itself sufficient justification. "Quiet death," Hegseth called it.

There is a bitter historical irony here. In 1915, the sinking of the HMS Lusitania, a British cruise liner, by a German U-boat (submarine) operating off the coast of Ireland, played a significant role in turning American public opinion against Germany. Two years later, in April 1917, President Woodrow Wilson seized upon Germany's declaration of unlimited submarine warfare as the pretext for the entry of the United States into World War I.

More than a century later, a US submarine sneaks up on an Iranian vessel and destroys it with one torpedo, and Pete Hegseth laughs about it.

To understand the nature of what was done, one must understand the grotesque disproportion of the forces involved.

A United States Navy Arleigh Burke-class destroyer displaces approximately 9,000 tons. It is nearly 155 meters in length. It carries 90 to 96 vertical launch cells capable of firing Tomahawk cruise missiles, advanced surface-to-air missiles and anti-submarine weapons. It is integrated into the Aegis Combat System, one of the most sophisticated battle-management networks ever built, linking it in real time to satellites, aircraft and other naval vessels across an entire theater of operations. The

United States Navy operates scores of such ships. It operates 11 nuclear-powered aircraft carrier strike groups, each one a mobile city of airpower capable of projecting lethal force across an entire ocean.

The IRIS Dena displaced 1,500 tons—one-sixth the displacement of a single American destroyer. It was 94 meters long, powered by four domestically produced Iranian diesel engines. It was armed with anti-ship missiles of Iranian manufacture, a 76-millimeter deck gun and lightweight torpedoes. The crew was comprised of 180 men. It was not a peer competitor to American naval power. IRIS Dena was a coastal frigate, built under sanctions, with domestically engineered systems that Iranian engineers had labored for years to produce precisely because Western powers had cut Iran off from global arms markets. That it could sail at all, that it could circumnavigate the globe as it had done in 2022 and 2023, was a testament to the ingenuity of those who built it and were its crew.

The Iranian sailors who were murdered have no names in the American press. They have no faces. They have no families that Western journalists have been dispatched to interview. They were mostly young men, who had spent months away from their families on a professional naval deployment.

The Iranian crew were given no warning. They had no time to fight, to flee, or even to understand what was happening to them. The ship went down so rapidly that when the Sri Lankan Navy—not the United States Navy, not any American vessel but the navy of a small island nation acting under its international maritime obligations—arrived at the scene, the IRIS Dena had already completely vanished beneath the surface.

The US submarine that killed them made no attempt to rescue survivors, in direct contravention of its legal obligations under the Second Geneva Convention (1949), Article 18. It fired its torpedo, confirmed its kill and departed. The 32 sailors who survived owe their lives entirely to Sri Lanka's rescue operations. The United States, which possesses the most powerful and technologically advanced navy on earth, did not deploy a single asset to pull a single drowning man from the water.

We do not know what the American sailors aboard the submarine were told as they executed their orders. But when they discover the truth—that they fired without cause and sent 140 men to their death—many of them will feel traumatic regret and shame that will last for the rest of their lives.

The IRIS Dena was not in Iranian waters. It was not in the Persian Gulf, not in any declared exclusion zone. It was not maneuvering aggressively or targeting any vessel. It was not part of any active naval engagement. It was sailing alone, without escort, thousands of miles from the nearest combat theater, heading home after participating—at India's explicit invitation—in the International Fleet Review 2026 and the multinational exercise MILAN 2026 at the port of Visakhapatnam. That exercise had included 74 nations. It had included the United States. American and Iranian naval officers had, days before the sinking, attended the same professional gatherings on Indian soil.

The United States possessed every means to warn this vessel. It possessed every means to demand her diversion to a neutral port. It

possessed surface ships, aircraft, and global communications systems. The IRIS Dena was a surface vessel, visible, trackable, reachable by radio on any international maritime frequency. No warning was given because none was intended. The administration did not consider a warning necessary because it does not consider explanation necessary, because it does not recognize any legal or moral authority beyond Trump's "morality."

The US media has accepted this crime without comment. But imagine that a Russian submarine, operating in the Indian Ocean, had located a Ukrainian naval vessel—a frigate of comparable size to the IRIS Dena—returning home from a multinational exercise to which it had been invited, sailing alone in international waters, posing no immediate threat to anyone. Imagine that the Russian submarine had fired a single torpedo, without warning, without any attempt at obtaining a surrender, and sent the ship and most of its 180-man crew to the bottom of the sea. Imagine that Russia's Defense Minister then stood before cameras in Moscow to celebrate the attack as a demonstration of Russian reach and power, declared it the greatest torpedo kill since the Second World War.

No feat of imagination is required to describe the Western response. It would be immediate, thunderous and uniform. The words "war crime" would be on the lips of bourgeois politicians of every stripe, from Republican fascists like Lindsay Graham to "left" Democrats like Bernie Sanders. In Europe, the condemnations issued by NATO leaders would be piously seconded by all political parties. The International Criminal Court would be invoked before the day was out. Emergency sessions of the UN Security Council would be convened. Legal scholars would appear on every network to enumerate the violations—of the UN Charter, of the laws of naval warfare, of the customary international law of armed conflict. Calls would be made for the personal criminal prosecution of the Russian president under the doctrine of command responsibility. Western governments would impose sweeping new sanctions. The drowned Ukrainian sailors would have names and faces and families on every screen.

Every legal and moral argument that would be deployed against Russia in that case applies, with identical force, to what the United States did on March 4, 2026. The facts are materially identical. The legal framework is the same. The humanitarian consequences are equally real. The only difference is the American identity of the submarine.

The actions of the US government replicate those of the Third Reich. Admiral Karl Dönitz issued his Laconia Order in 1942, directing U-boat commanders to abandon all rescue operations for survivors and to conduct unrestricted submarine warfare without warning. The infamous order stated:

All efforts to save survivors of sunken ships, such as the fishing out of swimming men and putting them on board lifeboats, the righting of overturned lifeboats, or the handing over of food and water, must stop. Rescue contradicts the most basic demands of the war: the destruction of hostile ships and their crews.

At his trial at Nuremberg, Nazi Admiral Donitz defended this order by arguing that modern warfare had rendered obsolete the older conventions of naval chivalry.

He received a prison sentence of 10 years. Hegseth announced "quiet death" before cameras, without lawyers, without shame, without the remotest suggestion that the killing of 140 sailors in international waters—without warning, without threat, without a single attempt to save them afterward—was anything other than an occasion for national self-congratulation.

The chain of command that ordered these killings ran from the

submarine's torpedo room to the White House. The doctrine of command responsibility, established at Nuremberg and embedded in international law, holds that political and military leaders bear criminal responsibility for war crimes committed by forces under their command—not only when they order such crimes directly, but when they knew or should have known of the crimes and failed to prevent or punish them. On this occasion, knowledge is not in question. The crime was announced, celebrated and broadcast to the world by the secretary of war himself, in the presence of the chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff.

The implications of the torpedoing of IRIS Dena extend beyond the high seas. The government which has authorized murder in the Indian Ocean has justified the killing of Americans on the streets of Minneapolis. On January 7, 2026, a federal ICE agent shot and killed Renée Nicole Good, a 37-year-old mother, while she sat in her car. On January 24, Alex Pretti, an intensive care nurse, was shot at least 10 times by Border Patrol agents while he was already being held down on the pavement, his gun never drawn.

The doctrine is identical in both cases. Those killed by American power—whether Iranian sailors in the Indian Ocean or American citizens on the sidewalks of Minneapolis—were the targets of state-sponsored murder. The victims are always, retroactively, guilty of something. Renée Good had her car. Alex Pretti had his legally carried firearm. What is practiced on American streets is practiced in the Indian Ocean. It is one doctrine and one government operating in the interests of the same ruling class.

The international working class, students and all opponents of imperialism must actively mobilize against this war. They must demand the immediate cessation of military operations against Iran and the convening of an independent international workers' tribunal to investigate the war crimes being committed under Operation Epic Fury.

The torpedo that sank the IRIS Dena did not only kill 140 sailors. It announced to the world and without apology that the United States government is not bound by any law, any convention or any standard of civilized conduct. The only imperatives that it recognizes are those dictated by the capitalist system and the accumulation of profit.

Every day, every new crime adds increased urgency to the warning of Leon Trotsky: "Without a socialist revolution, in the next historical period at that, a catastrophe threatens the whole culture of mankind."



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