



## Sinking of the Unarmed IRIS *Dena*

*The USS Charlotte nuclear submarine fired two torpedoes at the IRIS Dena and watched as 104 sailors drowned.*



By **Shapour Ghasemi**

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Iranian frigate IRIS *Dena*

On the morning of March 4, 2026, amid the 2026 war on Iran, at 05:08 Sri Lanka Standard Time (SLST), the Iranian Navy frigate IRIS *Dena* issued a distress call. At the time, IRIS *Dena* was in international waters, 19 nautical miles (35 km) off the coast of Galle, on Sri Lanka's southern coast.

A few days earlier, on February 28, 2026, the United States and the Israeli military jointly launched an unprovoked attack on Iran. On the first day of the war, the Israeli military, operating in northern Iran, assassinated Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, along with many of his close family members, including his 14-month-old granddaughter. Many high-ranking Iranian military

officers were also assassinated, as were numerous civilian government officials in the north of the country.

The United States and Israel had divided Iran's land and maritime territory into two designated operational regions. Israeli forces were assigned to operations in the north, while U.S. forces were assigned to operations in the south.

In the early hours of the attack, the United States Navy warship USS *Spruance* launched three Tomahawk cruise missiles at Shajareh Tayebah Primary School in Minab, in the southern region of the country, massacring 156 children, teachers, staff members, and parents.

A few hours later, on the afternoon of the same day, the United States fired three newly developed PrSM missiles at the southern city of Lamerd, a city with no military significance. The missiles, which had not previously been used under real-world combat conditions, were each loaded with 180,000 tungsten pellets. The attack caused a bloodbath, killing 24 people, including five children, and injuring more than 130 others, many of whom were left with permanent disabilities.

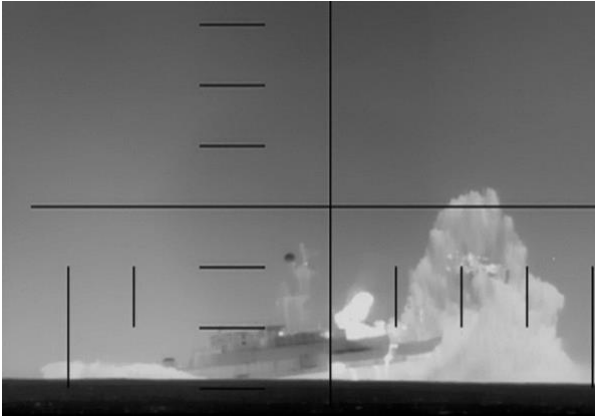
In February 2026, IRIS *Dena*, commanded by Commander Abuzar Zarri, participated in the International Fleet Review 2026, and MILAN 2026 international naval exercise held at the port of Visakhapatnam, India, alongside naval forces from several countries, including the United States and Russia.

It is mandatory for warships participating in the International Fleet Review and exercise to carry no ammunition on board. Accordingly, IRIS *Dena* traveled to India without any ammunition on board.

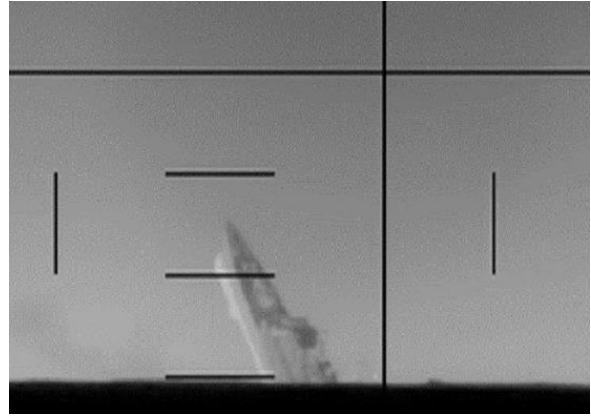
On the morning of March 4, 2026, the United States Navy's nuclear-powered submarine USS *Charlotte* approached the unarmed Iranian Navy frigate IRIS *Dena* in international waters off the southern coast of Sri Lanka. Although the Iranian vessel posed no threat, USS *Charlotte* fired two Mk 48 torpedoes at IRIS *Dena*. The United States was also aware, or should have been aware, that the Iranian vessel, IRIS *Dena*, was unarmed.

Both torpedoes struck the stern of IRIS *Dena*. Upon receiving the distress call from IRIS *Dena*, the Sri Lanka Navy and the Sri Lanka Air Force immediately

launched a search-and-rescue operation. However, within a few minutes, the ship sank stern-first, leaving its bow in the air with 136 military personnel on board, including members of the Iranian Navy band.



[The second torpedo struck the aft section of IRIS Dena](#)



[IRIS Dena sank stern-first << watch the footage](#)

The Sri Lanka Navy rescued 32 survivors and reported that 104 Iranian Navy personnel were killed in the attack, a figure that includes 20 personnel who remain missing. Search-and-recovery teams recovered the bodies of 84 Iranian sailors.

The United States Navy submarine USS *Charlotte* was the first vessel at the scene. Although it had fired the torpedoes that struck the *IRIS Dena*, it made no attempt to rescue a single drowning sailor. Instead, the submarine remained at a safe distance while Iranian naval personnel drowned and sank to the bottom of the ocean. Had the crew of the USS *Charlotte* acted honorably and in accordance with maritime law and accepted rules of conduct at sea, the death toll would certainly have been lower.

On March 4, 2026, a few hours after the U.S. Navy submarine USS *Charlotte* sank the *IRIS Dena*, U.S. Secretary of War Pete Hegseth expressed exultation during a [press briefing at the Pentagon](#),

emphasizing what he described as the operation's historic significance:



[U.S. Secretary of War Pete Hegseth during a press briefing at the Pentagon, March 4, 2026 << watch the video](#)

“[Y]esterday in the Indian Ocean, and we'll play it on the screen there,” he said, “an American submarine sunk an Iranian warship that thought it was safe in international waters. Instead, it was sunk by a torpedo, quiet death. The first sinking of an enemy ship by a torpedo since World War II.”

By March 13, the remains of the crew members who had been killed were handed over to the Iranian authorities for repatriation and final rites. The United States asked Sri Lanka not to release the survivors, arguing that they might rejoin the Iranian Navy and return to combat.

The survivors were ultimately repatriated to Iran on April 14, 2026, during the ceasefire between the United States and Iran.

On April 21, 2026, Commander Abuzar Zarri, the captain of IRIS *Dena*, and the vessel's first officer appeared in an interview on Iranian television. Commander Zarri, who was injured, appeared using a crutch. Their interview provided a firsthand account of the attack, during which



The crew of IRIS *Dena* were rescued by Sri Lankan rescue teams, on March 4, 2026

they alleged that the U.S. Navy had carried out a deliberate "double-tap" strike intended to maximize casualties.

According to Commander Zarri, IRIS *Dena* had been disarmed as a condition of participating in India's MILAN 2026 international naval exercise in Visakhapatnam. As a result, IRIS *Dena* was defenseless and unable to defend itself against any hostile attack. The U.S. Navy also participated in the MILAN 2026 exercise and was therefore fully aware that IRIS *Dena* was unarmed.

Commander Zarri further recounted that the first U.S. torpedo struck the ship at 3:35 a.m. on March 4, damaging the propeller shaft and propeller, and leaving the vessel dead in the water. "We lost our mobility," Zarri said, adding that the first strike caused no immediate fatalities.

He continues: “For the next 90 minutes, the crew attempted emergency procedures while gathering on the aft deck, preparing to evacuate or surrender. The first officer said he ordered the sailors to assemble on the helicopter landing pad while he inspected the ship to ensure no one was left behind.”

"At 5:06 a.m., a second torpedo struck the aft section directly beneath the assembled crew, killing 104 of our friends, our comrades, our dear brothers. That was their intention," Zarri said.



Commander Abuzar Zarri, the captain of IRIS *Dena*

The timing and location of the strikes—particularly the second strike—are obvious indications of a war crime. Once the ship had been disabled and the crew was visibly preparing to abandon ship or surrender, firing the second torpedo violated customary rules of naval warfare. In fact, it was not aimed at neutralizing a military threat but at maximizing casualties.

The attack occurred just 18 minutes before IRIS *Dena* was expected to enter Sri Lankan territorial waters near Galle, where it had hoped to find protection from U.S. pursuit.

Iranian officials in Tehran, through the Iranian Embassy in New Delhi, requested safe harbor from the Indian government on February 28, 2026, the day the United States and Israel launched their joint attack on Iran. The request concerned IRIS *Dena* and its two escort ships, IRIS *Lavan*, a landing ship, and IRIS *Bushehr*, a cadet training and replenishment vessel.

All three Iranian ships had participated in the MILAN 2026 naval exercise hosted by India from February 15 to 25 in the coastal city of Visakhapatnam. They departed Indian waters on February 25 and were likely in international waters on February 28, 2026, while on their voyage home.

On Monday, March 9, 2026, Indian Foreign Minister Subrahmanyam Jaishankar told Parliament that "The Iranian side had requested permission on 28 February

for three ships in the region to dock at our ports. This was accorded on 1 March." "IRIS *Lavan* actually docked on 4 March in Kochi. The crew is currently in Indian naval facilities. We believe that this was the right thing to do."

Despite the Indian government's acknowledgment that, as Foreign Minister Subrahmanyam Jaishankar told Parliament on March 9, 2026, it had approved Iran's request for safe harbor for the three Iranian Navy ships, IRIS *Dena*, IRIS *Lavan*, and IRIS *Bushehr*, the actual permission to dock was delayed. As a result, IRIS *Dena* was forced to reverse course off India's western coast near Kochi and sail southeast for more than three days, from February 28 to March 3, 2026. Eventually, only IRIS *Lavan* was permitted to dock at the Indian port of Kochi on March 4, 2026. During that three-day interval, Indian naval intelligence relayed the positions and communications of the Iranian vessels to the United States, which helped USS *Charlotte* intercept IRIS *Dena*'s course before it reached Galle and Sri Lankan territorial waters. The Pentagon had already issued a "catch-and-kill" order to USS *Charlotte*.

Later, Sri Lanka acknowledged that it had granted sanctuary to IRIS *Bushehr* on March 5, one day after the vessel requested permission to dock because of an engine malfunction.

The chain of events has drawn attention to the roles of the Indian and Sri Lankan governments.

The allegation that the Sri Lankan government delayed its decision on Iran's request for sanctuary because of pressure from the United States and Israel has been widely highlighted.

On Thursday, March 5, 2026, Sri Lankan opposition MP Mujibur Rahman stated in Parliament that "A delay of 11 hours on our part is what sacrificed the Iranian vessel. That's outrageous. It's inhumane."

These actions, and in particular the relaying of the positions and communications of the Iranian vessels to the United States, make Narendra Modi and Subrahmanyam Jaishankar, the Prime Minister and Foreign Minister of India, complicit in the U.S. submarine's actions. They are culpable as

accessories to the deaths of the 104 members of IRIS *Dena's* crew. This constitutes an Indian war crime.

With the assistance the United States received from the governments of India and Sri Lanka, USS *Charlotte* finally intercepted IRIS *Dena* just before dawn on March 4, 2026, and fired two torpedoes at the vessel. The first torpedo disabled *Dena*, leaving her dead in the water. Approximately 90 minutes later, a second torpedo struck the aft section directly beneath the crew as they were assembled on the aft deck in preparation for evacuation. The second strike was not militarily necessary and was intended to maximize casualties.

Commander Thomas Futch, the captain of USS *Charlotte*, could have acted honorably and rescued a few of the drowning sailors, but instead, with extreme ruthlessness, he watched 104 Iranian sailors drown. USS *Charlotte* rescued none, in violation of humanitarian law and the international law of the sea.

[Article 18 of the Geneva Convention \(GC II\)](#) of 12 August 1949 defines the rules of engagement at sea:

After each engagement, Parties to the conflict shall, without delay, take all possible measures to search for and collect the shipwrecked, wounded and sick, to protect them against pillage and ill-treatment, to ensure their adequate care, and to search for the dead and prevent their being despoiled.

At the Pentagon press briefing on March 2, 2026, Secretary of War Pete Hegseth insisted that the United States would "fight to win" in its attacks on Iran. He added that there would be "no stupid rules of engagement."



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