

Sinking of IRIS *Dena*

During the 2026 Iran war, the Iranian Navy frigate *IRIS Dena* was torpedoed and sunk by the United States Navy's Los Angeles-class submarine *USS Charlotte* in the Indian Ocean.

Dena had recently taken part in the International Fleet Review 2026 naval exercise hosted by India and was returning home when it was sunk in international waters, approximately 19 nautical miles (35 km; 22 mi) off the coast from Galle, Sri Lanka. On 4 March, *Charlotte* fired two Mark 48 torpedoes at *Dena*, of which one hit the frigate. Its Bell 212 helicopter appeared to have not been present during its sinking.

It is the fourth ship that has been sunk by a torpedo since 1945, and the first by a US Navy submarine. Additionally it was the first instance of a nuclear-powered submarine sinking an enemy surface vessel since the sinking of ARA General Belgrano by Royal Navy nuclear submarine *HMS Conqueror* during the Falklands War.^{[3][4][5]}

Background



IRIS Dena dressed overall

IRIS Dena was a Moudge-class frigate launched in 2015, and was commissioned into the Iran Navy in 2021.^[6] The ship had an armament of surface-to-air

Sinking of IRIS *Dena*

Part of the 2026 Iran war



Unclassified video of *IRIS Dena* being hit by a Mk-48 torpedo

Date	4 March 2026 <div> <div>ca. 05:08–05:10 SLST (23:38–23:40 GMT)^[a]</div> </div>
Location	19 nmi (35 km; 22 mi) ^[1] off Galle , Sri Lanka <div> <div>6.0073°N 79.8654°E^[b]</div> </div>
Result	American victory

Belligerents

 United States
 Iran

Units involved

 United States Navy
 Islamic Republic of Iran Navy
 ↳ *USS Charlotte*
 ↳ *IRIS Dena*

Strength

1 *Los Angeles-class submarine*
1 *Moudge-class frigate*

Casualties and losses

None
IRIS Dena sunk
87 killed
61 missing
32 rescued

and anti-ship missiles, torpedoes, and was equipped with several guns and cannons.^[7] However, the ship was reportedly unarmed or lightly armed at the time because of its participation in the International Fleet Review which required its participants to not carry any ammunition. The United States also attended and may have been aware that the ship was unarmed or lightly armed.^{[8][9][10]} However, the United States Indo-Pacific Command has denied that *Dena* was unarmed.^[11]

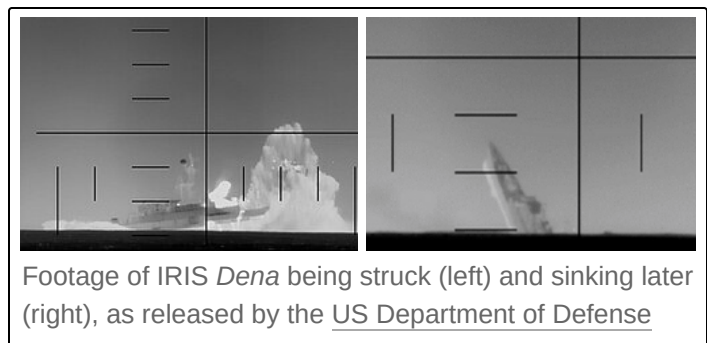
The vessel participated in the International Fleet Review 2026 and the multinational naval exercise Milan held at Visakhapatnam^[12] from 15 to 25 February 2026.^[13] Crew members had also embarked on a cultural visit of India, visiting the Taj Mahal and Kailasagiri as well as participating in a city parade.^[14] On 26 February, the Iranian embassy in Sri Lanka requested a "goodwill visit" for *Dena* and two other ships starting March 9. Sri Lanka was considering the request taking into account^[15] the US military buildup against Iran.^[16] As U.S.–Israeli airstrikes began on targets within Iran on 28 February,^{[17][18]} Sri Lankan government told Iran that they would allow ships at war to dock only in cases of emergency, following the precept of Hague Conventions of 1899 and 1907 about neutral powers.^[15] Indian foreign minister S. Jaishankar said that Iranian ships present in the Indian Ocean had then requested the Indian Navy for docking at the Port of Kochi.^[19] It is not clear why *Dena* continued to try to dock in Sri Lanka till March 3.^[15]



Sri Lanka requested a "goodwill visit" for *Dena* and two other ships starting March 9. Sri Lanka was considering the request taking into account^[15] the US military buildup against Iran.^[16] As U.S.–Israeli airstrikes began on targets within Iran on 28 February,^{[17][18]} Sri Lankan government told Iran that they would allow ships at war to dock only in cases of emergency, following the precept of Hague Conventions of 1899 and 1907 about neutral powers.^[15] Indian foreign minister S. Jaishankar said that Iranian ships present in the Indian Ocean had then requested the Indian Navy for docking at the Port of Kochi.^[19] It is not clear why *Dena* continued to try to dock in Sri Lanka till March 3.^[15]

Naval action

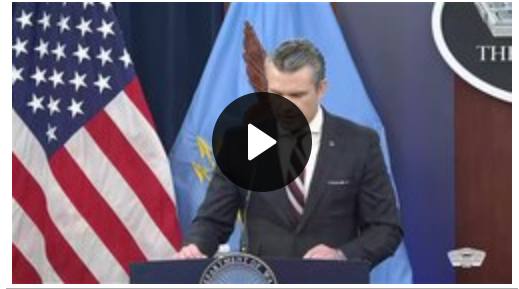
Dena was sunk in the early morning of 4 March 2026.^[20] A U.S. official stated that the United States did not provide a warning prior to carrying out the strike.^[21] According to the Sri Lankan Ministry of Foreign Affairs, *Dena* issued a distress call at 05:08 SLST, reporting an explosion, prompting an immediate search and rescue operation by the Sri Lanka Navy and Sri Lanka Air Force. The ship was returning to Iran from India, and was about 19 nautical miles (35 km; 22 mi) off the coast from Galle, Sri Lanka, in international waters, when the attack occurred.^{[22][23]} The ship sank within 2-3 minutes of the attack.^[24]



During a briefing at The Pentagon, U.S. Secretary of Defense Pete Hegseth confirmed that *Dena* had been sunk by a US Navy submarine.^{[27][28]} Other government officials specified that the submarine was USS *Charlotte*, which fired two Mark 48 torpedoes and hit *Dena* with one of them.^[29] Hegseth, commenting on the

engagement, stated: "[*Dena*] thought it was safe in international waters. Instead, it was sunk by a torpedo. Quiet death."^{[25][26]} Australian Prime Minister Anthony Albanese later confirmed that three Royal Australian Navy personnel were on board the submarine.^{[30][31]}

This was the first instance of a nuclear-powered submarine sinking an enemy surface vessel since the sinking of ARA *General Belgrano* by the Royal Navy nuclear submarine HMS *Conqueror* during the Falklands War. It is the first such naval action by a US Navy submarine since the Pacific theater of World War II.^{[4][5]}



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Rescue efforts

At the time of the incident, there were approximately 180 people on board the frigate,^[32] including members of the Iranian Navy band.^[33] Reports indicate that at least 87 individuals were killed in the attack, while at least 61 others remained missing. The United States Indo-Pacific Command stated that U.S. forces had planned for life-saving support to survivors in accordance with the Law of Armed Conflict that Sri Lanka then provided.^[34] Thirty-two survivors were rescued by the Sri Lanka Navy and transported to the Galle National Hospital, where they received medical treatment for exhaustion and injuries related to the blast.^{[35][32]}

According to an official press release by the Indian Navy, they were notified in the early hours by the Sri Lanka Navy of the distress call to the Maritime Rescue and Coordination Centre (MRCC) Colombo. India thereafter deployed INS *Tarangini* and INS *Ikshak* from Kochi as well as its P-8I Neptune long-range maritime patrol aircraft to search for survivors that evening. The P-8I was launched at 10:00 IST along with another aircraft equipped with air-droppable life rafts to support the search operations being led by the Sri Lankan authorities. *Tarangini* reached the designated search area by 16:00 IST but the Sri Lanka Navy and agencies had already begun operations.^{[36][37][38]}

The Indian Navy ships terminated their search on 6 March. The Sri Lanka Navy and Indian patrol aircraft ended search operations on 8 March.^{[39][40]}

Aftermath

Crew

The Sri Lanka Navy recovered 87 bodies of Iranian sailors. They were taken to Galle National Hospital. The Iranian authorities have requested Sri Lanka to hand over all the bodies of the sailors who died in the attack on board *IRIS Dena* so they can be repatriated for final rites. Until arrangements are made, the remains will be stored in the hospital's cold rooms.^{[41][42]} The residents of Visakhapatnam who had hosted the crew during MILAN-26 also expressed their anguish and concern for the well-being of the crew.^[14] The remains of 45 crewmembers who were killed were handed over to the Iranian embassy in Sri Lanka and repatriated to Iran via Mattala airport by 13 March while the survivors were sent to a Sri Lankan airbase at Koggala.^[43]

Iran

The government of Iran has called the attack "an atrocity at sea."^[44]

After the sinking of IRIS *Dena*, a second Iranian ship, *IRIS Bushehr* of the *Bandar Abbas* class, requested to enter Colombo port. The Sri Lankan government stated that Sri Lanka will act under international conventions, including the 1982 UN Convention on the Law of the Sea to take custodianship of *IRIS Bushehr*. The ship was later interned by the Sri Lanka Navy with its crew of 208. This is the first instance of a warship being interned in a neutral country since World War II. The crew members of *IRIS Bushehr*, consisting of 53 officers, 84 cadet officers, 48 senior sailors and 23 sailors, were transferred to Colombo and the ship was moved to Trincomalee Harbour by the Sri Lanka Navy.^{[23][45][46]}



The arrival of the bodies from the *Dena* sinking in Behesht-e Zahra

It was also reported that the landing ship *IRIS Lavan* with a crew of 183 sailors had sought refuge and been interned at Kochi, India late evening on 4 March, following the attack on *Dena*.^{[47][48][49]} The United States had urged Sri Lanka not to repatriate *IRIS Dena* survivors and *IRIS Bushehr* crew back to Iran so that Iran could not use them for propaganda. It also asked Sri Lanka if there were any attempts made to encourage defection among crew members.^[50] The ship also emerged as a public curiosity in Kochi.^[51] On 7 March, the Indian government said it had allowed *IRIS Lavan* to dock at Kochi on humanitarian grounds.^[52]

United States

The incident has sparked a debate regarding potential violations of international law by the United States, specifically the Second Geneva Convention, amid allegations that U.S. forces left the scene without attempting to rescue survivors.^{[33][53]} Academics who believe the submarine's actions were legal, argue that due to the lack of space within a submarine and risks of surfacing, submarines have been regarded as generally not having an obligation to engage in rescue operations, and that the attack was permitted due to the ongoing military conflict between Iran and the United States.^{[24][54]} Academics who believe the submarine's actions were illegal, argue that the submarine had an obligation to do what it could to save the crews' lives,^{[33][53]} and that the attack raises questions about the broader conflict's legality due to an expansion outside of imminent threats to the US.^{[55][56]} The sinking may also send signals to China that their Middle Eastern energy shipments through the Indian Ocean would be vulnerable to interdiction.^[57]

Australia

On 6 March, Australian Prime Minister Anthony Albanese acknowledged that three Australian Defence Force personnel were aboard the US submarine that sank *IRIS Dena*. He said that the Australian personnel were on board the submarine as part of a training rotation for the AUKUS security partnership, under which the United States will supply nuclear submarines to Australia. Albanese stated that Australian personnel did not participate in any "offensive action" against Iran.^[58]

India

On 4 March 2026, Indian strategic affairs analyst Brahma Chellaney stated that the U.S. Navy's sinking of IRIS *Dena* in India's "maritime neighbourhood" was "more than a battlefield event; it is a strategic embarrassment for New Delhi."^{[59][60]} Chellaney argued that by attacking a vessel returning from an Indian-hosted exercise, Washington transformed India's maritime neighbourhood into a "war zone," thereby challenging India's authority and its reputation as the preferred security partner in the Indian Ocean.^{[61][62]} Indian opposition parties also criticised the government's stand on the sinking.^{[63][64][65][66]}

India's former chief of naval staff, Admiral Arun Prakash, considered the attack shocking in multiple ways. He said "It's a bit of treachery of the US to attend a peaceful function side-by-side with Iranian navy, where there's a lot of camaraderie, and then the moment the Iranian ship pops out of harbour, it's sunk ... They could have delayed this action to spare India this embarrassment." He also said that targeting a guest of India that posed no immediate threat "leaves a very bad taste in my mouth".^[67]

See also

- List of ships sunk by torpedoes after 1945

Footnotes

- The day before.
- Approximate sinking location based on oil spill^[2]

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