

'Kill everybody': War crimes in the Caribbean expose imperialism in crisis

written by Gary Wilson
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War criminal Pete Hegseth, shown at the War Department, ordered the unlawful

killing of defenseless survivors in Caribbean waters.

The execution of defenseless survivors in the water — an act that meets every definition of a war crime — exposes the real thrust of U.S. actions in the Caribbean. This is not about drug trafficking. It is open aggression undertaken by an imperialist system in crisis, relying ever more on force as its authority erodes.

Extrajudicial killings at sea and threats against Venezuela's sovereignty are not isolated outrages. Taken together, they show a system losing control and turning to force, illegality, and war crimes.

The United States is not acting from a position of strength. It is responding to the decline of U.S. imperialism in the world economy and a shrinking ability to impose its will abroad. History shows that imperialism becomes most dangerous in crisis, turning to open force when it can no longer get its way through economic dominance or political manipulation.

A criminal order that strips away the mask

On Sept. 2, a U.S. aircraft spotted a small boat near Trinidad and the Trump administration quickly declared it was “suspected” of carrying drugs. A missile destroyed the vessel. Two survivors, wounded and unarmed, clung to debris in the water.

According to a detailed Washington Post investigation, Defense Secretary Pete Hegseth issued a verbal instruction: “Kill everybody.” A second strike was ordered. The survivors were killed where they floated.

This was no battlefield confusion. It was the deliberate killing of shipwrecked people — an act explicitly condemned in the Pentagon's own Law of War Manual. Former Judge Advocates General warned that if the U.S. claims this was an armed conflict, the order amounted to a prohibited “no-quarter” command, a war crime. If it were

not an armed conflict, the killing of defenseless civilians would be murder under U.S. law.

Trump brushed the matter aside, calling the mission “lethal kinetic” and labeling the dead “narco-terrorists.” The terminology changes from era to era, but the purpose is the same: to strip human beings of rights and to justify violence without restraint. This is how imperialist power behaves when its legal façade collapses.

Growing fractures inside the state

The effects of these unlawful killings don’t stop in the Caribbean. They’re also creating tension and divisions inside the U.S. government and the military.

On Nov. 18, six Democratic members of Congress — each with backgrounds in the military or intelligence agencies — released a video reminding U.S. troops of their duty to refuse illegal orders. Their intervention brought into the open a conflict that had been simmering for months.

Trump’s response was immediate and extreme: He accused the six of treason and suggested they should face execution. His tirade only brought more attention to the video.

The six did not call for disobedience in general. They stated a basic legal fact: Troops cannot defend themselves later by claiming they were “only following orders” if they carry out war crimes. The significance lies elsewhere. Their intervention signals growing concern within parts of the ruling class and the state apparatus that Trump is steering the military toward confrontation with the population — and speeding up the decline of U.S. imperialism in the process.

These tensions have been visible for months. National Guard units deployed in Los Angeles to support ICE raids reported discontent and refusals to serve. Members of Congress say they have received increasing calls from active-duty troops and Guard

members questioning the legality of the missions they are being sent on. Whatever their motives, the six lawmakers' video has made the question of refusing illegal orders impossible to ignore.

That question applies as much to the Caribbean as it does to the streets of U.S. cities. Troops have the same duty to refuse orders to fire on civilian boats near Venezuela as they do to refuse orders to fire on people at home. The killings carried out by the U.S. fleet since August — more than 100 people blown apart in the water under the pretext of drug enforcement — are crimes. Those who carry them out are responsible for those crimes, even if the officials giving the orders bear the greater guilt.

The removal of Adm. Alvin Holsey, who reportedly objected to the attacks and instructed that survivors be rescued, underscores the depth of the internal conflict.

Trump's threat against the six lawmakers exposed a division inside the government that had been simmering for months. Some now respond to any criticism as if it were a criminal act, while others worry that Trump's use of military force — at home and abroad — is damaging the state they depend on. The clash reflects the deepening instability of the imperialist state amid its global decline.

For anti-imperialists, there is now space to speak directly to U.S. troops and the National Guard: They must refuse illegal orders, whether those orders call for firing on migrants, protesters, or civilians in the Caribbean. Rejecting criminal directives is not merely permitted — it is required.

