

25 September 2008

CANADA SAVES LIVES BY EXTENDING NAVAL ESCORTS TO SOMALIA, WFP SAYS

NEW YORK – The United Nations World Food Programme (WFP) today welcomed the decision by Canada to extend its naval mission protecting ships carrying humanitarian aid to Somalia for a further month. Ships operating off the coast of Somalia have been targeted by pirates, jeopardising a vital humanitarian lifeline to the country where more than 3 million face hunger as a result of drought, conflict and high food prices.

"Millions of hungry people face a total break in their humanitarian food supply due to the scourge of pirates attacking ships," said WFP's Executive Director, Josette Sheeran. "Make no mistake - Canada's generous act of extending naval protection will allow us to get food in and will save lives. We urgently call on other nations to step up to the plate."

Sheeran called for a comprehensive approach by the international community to provide naval escorts as part of on-going anti-piracy operations off Somalia. The UN Security Council in August commended those governments that had provided military escorts for humanitarian vessels and called on other member states to continue naval escorts providing crucial assistance for the safe delivery of humanitarian assistance.

The HMCS *Ville de Québec*, which took over escorting ships loaded with WFP food to Somalia in August, was scheduled to end its escort mission on 27 September -- its final journey was to be the escort of two vessels carrying nearly 20,000 metric tons of food WFP to the port of Mogadishu.

Before the Canadian announcement to extend its escorts until 23 October, some ship-owners had already started cancelling contracts with WFP out of fear of pirate attacks -- a move that threatened to cut off the delivery of more than 100,000 tons of food to Somalia over the coming months.

Since November last year, a succession of Canadian, Dutch, Danish and French frigates have been escorting WFP ships without incident, delivering a total 136,500 metric tons of food – enough to feed 2.6 million people for three months.

"WFP is very grateful to Canada for generously extending the mission of HMCS *Ville de Québec* at WFP's request at this very critical time for the Somali people," said WFP Somalia Deputy Country Director Denise Brown. "It is essential that we can line up the ships to feed Somalia without breaks in protection because we run out of escort vessels."

Naval escorts have proved to be a very effective deterrent against pirates, who have launched more than 60 attacks on shipping so far this year off Somalia's coast, making 2008 the worst year for piracy off Somalia. Ship-owners report that the very presence of a naval escort vessel appears to deter pirates from attacking other ships in the same area.

Ninety percent of WFP food assistance for Somalia arrives by sea. WFP needs to ship up to 150,000 metric tons to Somalia from the Kenyan port of Mombasa and ports in South Africa in the coming months to feed an average of 2.4 million people each month.

Insecurity, drought, a succession of poor or failed harvests, the weakness of the Somali shilling against the dollar, coupled with high food and fuel prices, have increased the number of people in need of humanitarian assistance in Somalia this year by 77 percent to more than 3 million.

Canada has given US\$15.7 million to WFP operations in Somalia since August 2006 including US\$5.4 million in 2008, making it the third largest donor to WFP's operations in Somalia, as well as worldwide.

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WFP is the world's largest humanitarian agency and the UN's frontline agency for hunger solutions. This year, WFP plans to feed 90 million people in 80 countries.

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