

## ***Plan Protects U.S. Flagged Ships from Pirates***

**(WASHINGTON, D.C.)** – U.S. Rep. Mike Coffman (R-Colorado) announced today that he believes the Obama Administration should immediately order the deployment of U.S. military personnel to provide security aboard U.S. flagged vessels sailing in the pirate infested waters off the Somali coastline. Coffman expressed his concerns in a letter to President Barack Obama and Defense Secretary Robert Gates. Coffman is also encouraging other nations to follow suit in protecting their merchant ships.

“Sending U.S. warships to patrol these waters isn’t enough. This is an area that is 1.1 million square miles and the U.S. Navy, or any navy, has their hands full trying to protect this vital shipping lane,” said Coffman, a U.S. Marine Corps combat veteran.

Coffman does not view the problem with the Somali pirates as a law enforcement one but rather as an act of war. What dysfunctional governing institutions Somalia does have either ignores or, in many cases, supports the growing threat of piracy off of their coast. The Somali pirates enjoy unrestricted access to Somali port facilities and land bases. Somalia has not had a stable central government for 17 years, leaving a security vacuum filled with Islamic extremists, a humanitarian crisis, and rampant piracy.

“Continuing to pay ransoms for seized crews, ships, and their cargos is not a solution but an incentive to increase the problems of piracy,” said Coffman.

Coffman strongly believes that the placement of small detachments of U.S. Marines or sailors aboard U.S. flagged merchant ships would end the piracy problem off the coast of Somalia for U.S. commercial shipping. Under Coffman’s proposal, rules of engagement would give U.S. military personnel, assigned to U.S. merchant ships, the authority to engage any small boats if they demonstrated a hostile intent when approaching U.S. merchant ships.

“This would be a much more cost effective way of ending any advantage that the pirates now

have. Our current policy is like trying to use a sledge hammer to get a fly when the only thing we really need is a fly swatter,” said Coffman when referring to the arming of U.S. flagged merchant ships.

Coffman’s plan comes on the heels of the kidnapping of Captain Richard Phillips following a raid on his ship by Somali pirates. Coffman believes that the incident involving the U.S. merchant ship Maersk Alabama was a spectacular show of courage, good luck, and the extraordinary skill of U.S. Special Forces, and the smart decision-making by the Captain of the USS Bainbridge, Commander Frank Castellano. Unfortunately, in the future, we may not be so fortunate and the pirates may be unwilling to take a ship’s Captain hostage to protect the safety of the crew, the crew of a merchant marine vessel may be unable to fight back, and the U.S. Navy might not be able to arrive before the pirates are able to make it back to land, which would make it extremely difficult to track them down.

“The United States established the Naval Armed Guard to protect U.S. merchant vessels during WWII and we can do it again,” said Coffman.

There is a precedent for Coffman’s plan for using U.S. military personnel on U.S. flagged merchant vessels. During WWII, U.S. military personnel were deployed on U.S. flagged ships for protection. These detachments were called “The Naval Armed Guard” and were established after the 1941 repeal of The Neutrality Act of 1936, which had outlawed the arming of U.S. merchant vessels. A typical detachment included a single officer with 24 gunners and three communications specialists. Many were also commanded by petty officers – enlisted noncommissioned officers who had previous naval experience.

“It’s crazy to talk about military raids on the Somali coastline when we have this option. These raids would not only put our military at a much higher risk of taking casualties but there would always be the potential of collateral damage causing harm to the innocent hostages and civilians in or around the target areas,” said Coffman.

Coffman is a veteran of both the U.S. Army and the Marine Corps. He is member of the House Armed Services Committee and sits on the Seapower and Expeditionary Forces Subcommittee.

A copy of the letter is below:

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April 15, 2009

President Barack Obama  
1600 Pennsylvania Avenue  
Washington, DC

President Obama,

As you are well aware, piracy has become a serious threat to both American and international shipping. The majority of these pirate attacks have taken place along the coastline of Somalia – a coastline the same length as the United States eastern seaboard – and in the Gulf of Aden north of Somalia.

The recent kidnapping of Captain Richard Phillips following a raid on his commercial ship, the Maersk Alabama, by Somali pirates proves more aggressive action is needed to combat piracy.

The incident involving the Maersk Alabama was a spectacular show of courage, good luck, the extraordinary military skill of U.S. Special Forces and the smart decision-making by the Captain of the USS Bainbridge, Commander Frank Castellano. Unfortunately, in the future, the pirates may be unwilling to take a ship's Captain hostage to protect the safety of the crew or the crew of a merchant vessel may be unable to fight back. They were very lucky that the U.S. Navy arrived before the pirates were able to make it back to land which would have made it extremely difficult to track them down.

The piracy problem is not a law enforcement challenge because the pirates have unrestricted access to Somali port facilities and land bases that are sanctioned by the governing institutions of Somalia irrespective of how dysfunctional they are. This is a military problem and these attacks on U.S. merchant ships constitute an act of war on the United States.

A new course of action should be reviewed. Sending U.S. Warships to patrol these waters isn't enough to protect U.S. flagged merchant ships. This is an area that is 1.1 million square miles and the U.S. Navy, or any navy, has their hands full trying to protect this vital shipping lane. The placement of small detachments of U.S. Marines or sailors aboard U.S. flagged merchant ships would help bring an end to the piracy problem off of the coast of Somalia for U.S. commercial shipping. This would be a much more cost effective way of ending any advantage that the pirates have. New rules of engagement should give U.S. military personnel, assigned to U.S. merchant ships, the authority to engage any small boat if it demonstrates hostile intent when approaching a U.S. merchant ship.

There is a precedent for using U.S. military personnel on U.S. flagged merchant vessels. During WWII, U.S. military personnel were deployed on U.S. flagged ships to provide protection. These detachments were called "The Naval Armed Guard," and were established after the 1941 repeal of the "Neutrality Act of 1936," which had outlawed the arming of U.S. merchant vessels.

It isn't necessary to talk about military operations against the pirates along the Somali coastline when we have the option to put small military detachments on board U.S. commercial ships. These raids would not only put members of our military unnecessarily at risk but there would always be the potential for collateral damage causing harm to the innocent hostages and civilians in the target areas.

Mr. President, how many sailors and Marines are available for such actions and are you willing to temporarily station military detachment on U.S. flagged merchant ships?

Thank you for your time and I look forward to your response.

Sincerely,

Mike Coffman, M.C.

CC: The Honorable Robert Gates