



PM ANNOUNCES ARMED PATROLS OF SOUTHERN OCEAN

Prime Minister John Howard has announced that Customs is to lease an ice-strengthened ship for armed surveillance and enforcement patrols, primarily to protect Australia's precious fish stocks from international poachers in the remote Southern Ocean.

He made the announcement during a visit to Customs facilities at Neutral Bay on Sydney Harbour.

Mr Howard said the recent high-seas pursuit of the Uruguyan-registered *Viarsa 1*, allegedly poaching Patagonian toothfish, had prompted the Government to step up its existing patrol arrangements.

An extra \$84.2 million will be made available to Customs over the next two years to fund the operation.

"What this will do is to add a new additional capacity to Customs, assisted by other agencies, to deal with illegal fishing," Mr Howard said.

"Protecting this country's fishing resources from illegal incursions is very much part of protecting our national sovereignty.

"We've done a good job up to date. But what we've decided is that we need a new capacity and we're going to give it to Customs because Customs are the experts at this. They're very good at it. They've demonstrated that in the past and that's why we're giving them this new capacity."

The Customs ship will carry a deck mounted .50 calibre machine gun, a Customs boarding party armed with handguns, Australian Fisheries officers and a civilian steaming party comprising merchant mariners able to crew apprehended illegal vessels.

It will conduct patrols of Australian waters surrounding Heard Island and McDonald Island and will be able to operate year-round in virtually all weather conditions.

In a joint statement, Customs Minister Senator Chris Ellison and Fisheries Minister Senator Ian Macdonald said that, while the primary purpose of the Southern Ocean patrols would be



Minister for Fisheries, Forestry and Conservation Senator Ian Macdonald (left) and Prime Minister John Howard (right) at the announcement of Customs enhanced Southern Ocean operations.

to detect and apprehend illegal fishing vessels targeting the valuable Patagonian toothfish, the Government was also sending a strong message that Australia would not tolerate any breaches of its exclusive economic zone (EEZ) or its marine reserves, wherever they may occur.

The statement added, "There are strong links suggesting organised international criminal involvement in toothfish poaching. The introduction of a permanent, armed patrol capability significantly increases the risk of detection and prosecution for those that seek to fund, organise or otherwise support poaching activity.

"It also makes clear Australia is prepared to lead the international fight to stop illegal fishing.

"We are determined to bring to justice those who ignore Australian sovereignty and laws and their international responsibilities.

"The pursuit and apprehension of the *Viarsa 1* was a tribute to the seamanship and dedication of civilian mariners, Customs and Fisheries officers."

The chartered Customs vessel is expected to be released for other Customs and Fisheries tasks when not on station in the Southern Ocean.