POOR ATTENDANCE AT AUTHORITY’S SESSIONS AGAIN DOMINATES DEBATE OF SECRETARY-GENERAL’S REPORT; DELEGATIONS CALL FOR MORE RESOURCES FOR AUTHORITY

The Seabed Authority’s Assembly, meeting at Kingston, this morning resumed debate on the annual report of its Secretary-General, with appeals to States parties to ensure full attendance at the organization’s sessions.

Chief Olufolajimi Modupe Akintola, Nigeria, President of the Assembly, announced that the West European and Others Group has nominated Australia to replace New Zealand on the Credentials Committee. This was agreed to by the Assembly.

The representative of Nigeria announced an offer by his country to host one of three workshops scheduled by the Authority for 2008. The dates would be communicated to the Secretariat later. India last week made a similar offer.

The President and the Secretary-General both expressed condolences on behalf of the Assembly, and the Authority respectively for the devastating earthquake which struck Japan yesterday.

The Assembly will next meet on Wednesday morning, 18 July, for the ceremony to dedicate the main conference room at the Jamaica Conference Centre - “The Kenneth Rattray Conference Room” - to the memory of the late Jamaican jurist.

Discussions of Secretary-General’s report

Almost all delegations expressed concern at poor attendance at the Assembly, a problem highlighted by the Secretary-General in the section of his report on membership of the Authority. The representative of Ghana said it was a question of responsibility and commitment, and States in default should exercise the necessary political will.
Some delegations put forward suggestions. Mexico, supported by Honduras, said attendance could be enhanced if more members participated in intercessional workshops. Belgium suggested greater efforts at coordinating meetings with missions in New York to take advantage of better access to air travel between that city and Kingston.

Also on attendance, Uganda proposed that the Authority consider holding sessions in January when New York-based delegations had less busy schedules, and at a time when they would be more willing to take advantage of the warmer climate. To ensure that interpretation services were available, the representative of Uganda suggested training for interpreters who would work on a contingency basis at the sessions.

The representative of Trinidad and Tobago said failure to have a caucus at the Authority’s meetings was not only injurious to the organization but could also undermine the Convention on the Law of the Sea. States Parties should not allow the progress achieved to be eroded. She reiterated her country’s commitment to the work of the Authority and urged members to ensure that the intergovernmental body had the required resources to effectively perform its duties.

Brazil pointed out that local recruitment of interpreters might be possible for English, French and Spanish since those languages were spoken in this region, but would prove more difficult for the other three official languages of the Authority – Arabic, Chinese and Russian.

Argentina suggested that the twenty-three members which had permanent missions to the Authority could play a more important function in collaborating with the Secretary-General to increase or encourage attendance.

The President reminded the Assembly that it was the individual and collective responsibility of every Member State to ensure that the Authority achieved the purpose for which it had been set up.

A number of delegations commented on the size and composition of the Legal and Technical Commission which was mentioned in paragraph 11 of the report. At the previous session of the Authority, the decision was taken to increase the size of the expert body from 15 to 25 members without prejudice to future elections. Spain said while it understood the need for broad representation on the Commission, efforts must be made to attract the best available expertise. The representative recommended nomination of candidates well in advance for the next election to the Commission in 2011. Ghana said it would not support any reduction in the size of the body.

In other comments, The Netherlands, Mexico and Portugal praised the Authority’s new web site developed by the Secretariat. Mexico suggested the addition of a link on the web site to sessions documents prior to 2004 which were currently only available through a search of the United Nations’ site.

Indonesia put forward a suggestion that observers to the Authority could contribute voluntarily to the budget of the Authority. The representative shared the concerns of the Secretary-General and other members with regard to the poor attendance at meetings.
Nigeria suggested that the Authority should have a close working relationship with the International Maritime Organization (IMO) and the Marine Environmental Protection Committee. He called for more of the Authority’s workshops to be hosted by member states to give greater publicity to the activities of the Authority.

With regard to the issue of poor attendance at meetings, the Secretary-General assured members that he had made efforts to address the problem in every possible forum. He said that 55 delegates were in attendance at this year’s session – just over one third of the full complement of 155 members. He would welcome any collaboration from permanent missions with respect to attendance.

Speaking on the matter of the Authority’s participation in the meeting of Oceans and Coastal Areas Network (UN-Oceans) in Paris in May 2007, the Secretary-General explained that this was a forum where United Nations entities concerned with maritime affairs cooperated to reinforce each others efforts. The Authority had played a role in developing the United Nations Atlas of the Oceans by providing data and information, as well as making a contribution of $5000 towards the project. The Secretary-General added that a full report of the Kaplan Project would be distributed to members as soon as it became available.

On the matter of observers paying voluntary contributions to support the work of the Authority, he noted that in the United Nations, this had been the practice of observer countries such as Germany, Switzerland and Korea before they became members.

With regard to future scientific workshops, the Secretary-General said that the Authority was open to staging workshops in all regions and a workshop would be hosted by Brazil during the first quarter of 2008. Efforts to organize one in Nigeria during 2007 had not been successful, however, the Nigerian representative explained that the workshop could not be organised for 2007 owing to the political situation in his country and was being rescheduled for the second quarter of 2008.

The Secretary-General declined to address the issue of the size and composition of the Legal and Technical Commission until this matter had been discussed in the Council.

Hariharan Pakshi Rajan, Senior Law of the Sea/Ocean Affairs Officer, Division for Ocean Affairs and the Law of the Sea at the United Nations Secretariat, spoke of the Division’s close cooperation with the Authority on many areas concerning the oceans. The Division’s main responsibilities related to the discharge of the functions in the field of oceans and the law of the sea entrusted to the United Nations Secretary-General under the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea.

He said one of the important functions of the Division related to the depository and the publicity functions entrusted to the United Nations Secretary-General under the Convention. The Division maintained appropriate facilities for the deposit by States of charts and geographical coordinates concerning maritime zones, including delimitation. It had an extensive database containing texts of national legislation on maritime zones and treaties dealing with delimitation of maritime boundaries.

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