The International Seabed Authority began its fifteenth session in Kingston this afternoon with the election of the presidents of its two top bodies – the Assembly and Council – and the adoption of their agendas for the annual gathering scheduled to conclude on 5 June.

The new President of the 157-member Assembly, nominated by Chile on behalf of the Group of Latin American and Caribbean States, is Mr Mario José Pino of Argentina. Mr Pino is his country’s ambassador to Jamaica and Permanent Representative to the Authority. (A biographical note will be issued as press release SB/15/3).

The Assembly adopted a 13-point agenda, which includes consideration of the annual report of the Secretary-General, reports of its Finance and Credentials Committees and examination of the draft Regulations on Prospecting and Exploration for polymetallic sulphides in the international seabed area beyond the limits of national jurisdiction.

Two vice-presidents of the Assembly were elected: South Africa will represent the African Group, while the vice-president for the Eastern European group is the Russian Federation. The other two vice-presidents will be nominated by the Asian and Western European and Others States groups at the Assembly’s next meeting on Thursday, 28 May.

Speaking after his election, Mr. Pino thanked the Government of Jamaica for hosting the Authority and its meetings, as well as its tireless efforts in the Group of Latin American and Caribbean States, both at the United Nations in New York and in other international fora to bring about greater recognition of the Authority by the international community.
The Assembly President welcomed the three new members of the Authority – Congo, Liberia and Switzerland. He exhorted members to improve their attendance and participation in the work of the Authority and signalled that commitment to the Authority’s activities could be beneficial to developing countries in particular.

Mr. Pino applauded the efforts of the new Secretary-General, Nii Allotey Odunton (Ghana) in bringing together permanent representatives to the Authority to exchange ideas on the work of the organization, especially that of its Assembly. He underscored the significance of the Secretary-General’s initiative, which, he said, augured well for better relations between the permanent missions and the secretariat outside of the Assembly’s regular sessions. He also said that permanent missions could play an important role towards increasing participation of delegations at the Authority’s meetings.

The Assembly approved a request for observer status to the Authority from World Wildlife Fund (WWF International), which has a general consultative status with the United Nations Economic and Social Council. The request was annexed to a Note by the Secretariat (ISBA/15/A/INF/1) which was added to the agenda. Rule 82, paragraph 1 (e) of the rules of procedure of the Assembly allows non-governmental organizations to participate in the work of the Assembly as observers.

WWF International is one of the world’s largest and most experienced independent conservation organizations with a global network active in more than 100 countries. Its mission is to stop the degradation of the planet’s natural environment and to build a future in which humans live in harmony with nature.

The Assembly postponed to its next meeting consideration of a similar request from the Commonwealth of Nations.

In other action, the Assembly elected Wang Quanling (China) to the Finance Committee to fill the vacancy resulting from the resignation of her compatriot Liu Jian. Ms Wang is Director, Environmental and Resources Division of the Department of Economic Construction in China’s Ministry of Finance.

The 36-member Council which met soon after the adjournment of the Assembly, elected Mr Mahmoud Samy, Deputy Assistant Minister of Foreign Affairs of Egypt, to serve as its president for the Authority’s fifteenth session. (A biographical note will be issued as press release SB/15/4).

Poland and Mexico were elected vice-presidents representing the Eastern European group, and the Group of Latin American and Caribbean States, respectively. The two remaining vice-presidents will be elected at the next meeting of the Council.
Three new members were elected by the Council to serve on the Legal and Technical Commission (LTC) to fill vacancies resulting from resignations. Zhang Haiqi (China), Deputy Director of the Department of Geological Investigation of the China Geological Survey fills the vacancy resulting from the resignation of his compatriot Hongtao Zhang; Nobuyuki Okamoto (Japan), Project Director, Deep-sea Mineral Exploration and Technology Division, at Japan Oil, Gas and Metals National Corporation replaces Yoshiaki Igarashi. Denis Gennadyevich Khramov (Russian Federation), Director of the Department of State Policy and Regulation in the Field of Geology and Subsoil Use, in the Ministry of Natural Resources and Ecology, replaces Sergey Fyodorov. The new members will serve the remaining three years left of their predecessors’ terms.

The main business of the Council during the session will be the continuation of detailed examination of the draft regulations for prospecting and exploration for polymetallic sulphides in the international seabed area. The Council will also consider the reports of the Legal and Technical Commission concerning, among other matters, its work on the draft regulations covering prospecting and exploration for cobalt-rich ferromanganese crusts. Consideration of the applications for approval of plans of work which were submitted to the Authority last year by Nauru Ocean Resources Inc. and Tonga Offshore Mining Ltd., has been postponed at the request of the applicants in light of current global economic circumstances and other concerns.

The Legal and Technical Commission met in closed session today and will continue its meetings on Tuesday and Wednesday. The ten-point agenda of the Commission, which has been meeting since 18 May, includes the annual reports of contractors, and recommendations for their guidance under regulation 38 of the Prospecting and Exploration for Polymetallic Nodules in the Area.

The Finance Committee will also meet Tuesday and Wednesday to review the audit report on the 2008 accounts of the Authority, and a report on the status of its Endowment Fund and Voluntary Trust Fund.

The Council will meet again in the afternoon of Thursday, 29 May to begin consideration of the draft Regulations.

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