SEABED ASSEMBLY HEARS FIRST REPORT OF NEW SECRETARY-GENERAL
AND HEARS ADDRESS FROM JAMAICA’S DEPUTY PRIME MINISTER

The Assembly of the International Seabed Authority, meeting in Kingston today, received the first report of its new Secretary-General, Nii Allotey Odunton (Ghana), elected New Zealand to serve as a vice-president, and heard Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of Foreign Affairs and Foreign Trade of Jamaica, Dr. Kenneth Baugh, reaffirm the host country’s commitment to support the work of the Authority.

The President of the Assembly, Ambassador Mario José Pino (Argentina), requested that the representatives of Honduras convey the Assembly’s sympathy to the government and people of his country which suffered loss of life and severe infrastructural damage from a powerful earthquake that rocked the Central American nation earlier this morning.

Also at the Assembly, the President noted that six of the required nine members to form the Credentials Committee had been appointed. Credentials are required for representatives of member States of the Authority, Observer States, United Nations bodies, and other organizations, agencies and entities having a standing invitation to attend meetings and participate in the work of the Assembly.

The Secretary-General prefaced his report by thanking members of the Authority for their demonstration of confidence in electing him to lead what he called “a world-class organization” overseeing fast-breaking work in the vast oceans on behalf of mankind.

Report of the Secretary General

The Secretary-General’s report (ISBA/15/A/2), presented to the Assembly under article 166, paragraph 4, of the 1982 United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea, provides an account of the Authority’s work since its last session as well as a brief overview of the present status of and prospects for deep seabed mining.
Introducing his first annual report to the Assembly, Secretary-General Nii Allotey Odunton, said the Authority had established itself as a world class organization and had carried out path-breaking work in research on marine environment. Mr. Odunton expressed pleasure at the level of attendance at this year’s session, however, he noted that poor attendance had long been an area of concern. He made a commitment to address the problem and to raise the profile of the Authority as a contributor to global development.

The Secretary-General said that the Authority’s membership had grown to 158 with the addition of Congo, Liberia and Switzerland during the past year. However, he expressed disappointment that 22 members which became parties to the 1982 United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea prior to the adoption of the 1994 Agreement relating to the Implementation of Part XI of the Convention, still had not become parties to the Agreement. Mr. Odunton also announced an increase in the number of permanent missions to the Authority to a total of 22 - Chile, Nigeria and the Republic of Korea being the most recent missions to be established.

On the status of contributions to the Authority’s budget, the report notes that a total of $272,422 is still outstanding from members for prior periods (1998-2008).

As at 27 May, 2009, 99.2% of the US$5,502,892 contributions to the 2008 budget due from member States and the European Community had been received from 58.1 % of the Authority’s membership. Of the 2009 budgeted income, 81.5% was received from 59 countries. Forty-eight members were in arrears for 2 years or more. As at 30 April 2009, the balance of the Authority’s Working Capital Fund stood at $438,054 - exceeding its approved ceiling of $438,000 by $54.

The balance of the voluntary trust fund now stood at $13,497, including an aggregate interest income of $3,244 in the 2007/2008 biennium. To date, a total of $256,328 has been paid out of the fund which was established in 2002 to enhance the participation of members of the Finance Committee and the Legal and Technical Commission from developing countries.

Three awards have been made under the Endowment Fund for Marine Scientific Research which was established in 2006 to promote and encourage the conduct of marine scientific research in the area for the benefit of mankind as a whole. It was aimed in particular to support the participation of qualified scientists and technical personnel from developing countries in marine research programmes.

The funds have been given to InterRidge, a non-profit organization concerned with promoting all aspects of mid-ocean ridge; the Rhodes Academy of Oceans Law and Policy; and the National Institute of Oceanography, Goa, India, to help finance a number of training fellowships for nationals of developing countries. Application forms for this programme (known as TAP-MAR) have recently been posted on the Authority’s web site www.isa.org.jm.

Since its establishment, contributions to the Fund have been made by the Governments of Mexico ($2,500), Spain ($25,514), and the United Kingdom ($29,800). As at 31 December 2008, the Fund’s capital stood at $2,689,603, with accumulated interest of $289,022.
The Secretary-General reported that two international workshops are planned over the next two years: the first, in 2009, will review the geological model of polymetallic nodule deposits in the Clarion-Clipperton zone. The second, scheduled for 2010, will ascertain the modalities for scientific collaboration in research on cobalt-rich ferromanganese crusts deposits in the international seabed area in order to address the standardization requirements for environmental data required for mining.

The Secretary-General stated that one of the greatest innovations in recent years had been the conduct of three sensitization seminars on marine minerals and other issues relevant to the Authority’s work. The first was held in Manado, Indonesia in 2007; the second in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil in 2008. The most recent was convened jointly by the Authority and the Nigerian Inter-ministerial Standing Committee on the International Seabed Authority in Abuja, Nigeria, from 24 to 26 March 2009. Mr. Odunton said this interaction between experts in deep seabed mining and marine environmental protection had made an impact in the countries where the seminars were held.

The report states that the secretariat’s geographic information base on the seabed and its resources has been significantly enhanced. A digital atlas (GIS Atlas) has been developed to accommodate geographic information on the international seabed Area and regions of potential outer continental shelf. An interactive web interface developed as an integral part of the GIS Atlas is the most comprehensive global geographic information system on the deep seabed and its resources. The online tool aims to disseminate the available data on resource potential as well as other physical, political and environmental information. It is also proposed during 2009 to initiate work on a geological model of polymetallic nodule deposits in the Central Indian Ocean basin.

Mr. Odunton highlighted some recent developments with respect to marine scientific research. He noted that the Authority relied heavily on studies carried out on sulphide deposits and the biodiversity surrounding these deposits by marine scientists working from cruise vessels. However, he pointed out that funding for these studies was focussed mainly on research conducted on active deposits at vent sites. Since the sulphide deposits that would be mined were inactive deposits, the research did not provide specific information required for the work of the Legal and Technical Commission. He stressed the need for more funding to be directed at research into inactive deposits. The Secretary-General further emphasized the need for ongoing international collaboration, including between relevant intergovernmental organizations, to ensure effective protection and preservation of the marine environment.

Mr. Odunton spoke of the call by the United Nations General Assembly for the Authority to move swiftly towards adopting regulations for the prospecting and exploration of polymetallic sulphides. He added that with regard to the polymetallic nodules, only one stage had been completed, that being the establishment of a code for exploration of those minerals. What was needed in the near future, he said, was a set of regulations that informs as to what profits and costs were associated with the exploitation of the resources. Without them it would be difficult to get real indications of the quality of those mineral deposits and the work that must be done as the Authority moved forward.
Following the presentation of the Secretary-General’s report, the Assembly was addressed by Dr. Kenneth Baugh, Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of Foreign Affairs and Foreign Trade of Jamaica.

Dr Baugh reiterated his Government’s support for Secretary-General Nii Allotey Odunton and assured him of its cooperation as he sought to carry out the activities he had outlined in his report.

As host country of the International Seabed Authority, Jamaica was committed to supporting the Authority’s work. His Government had last year undertaken significant upgrading of the facilities of the conference centre housing the Authority’s offices, which it expected to fully complete in the near future.

Dr. Baugh observed that the session was taking place amidst the worst economic recession in seventy years to which no country had been spared. Difficult and unprecedented measures had to be taken to address the impacts of the global downturn. It was imperative that the Authority’s members moved even more expeditiously to put in place the necessary provisions in the Convention to harness the resources of the seabed. While recognizing the capital intensive nature involved in deep seabed exploration and mining, it was Jamaica’s firm believe that efforts were made to pursue those endeavours. The future demanded that the pioneers and those who would join in the different exploration initiatives continued with that enterprise.

Of particular interest to Jamaica in the Authority’s substantive work programme, was the continued focus on the promotion and encouragement of marine scientific research in the international seabed Area. That was critical for Small Island Developing States such as those in the Caribbean as it allowed them to better understand and prepare for the potential impact of seabed mining on the environment. It also offered possibilities for scientists and institutions in developing countries to participate and benefit from marine scientific research.

Jamaica was encouraged by the importance that the Authority was giving to the protection of the marine environment in its future work plan. He observed that strengthening relationships and establishing coherence in the global measures for the protection of biodiversity in areas beyond national jurisdiction would be critical.

Interconnectedness of activities related to ocean affairs required cooperation and coordination and Jamaica was pleased that the Authority had embraced that principle and would seek to place its responsibilities and activities “in the broader context of development within the law of the sea as a whole”.

When the Assembly reconvenes this afternoon, it will commence its discussion on the report of the Secretary-General.

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