INTERNATIONAL SEABED AUTHORITY OPENS TWENTY-FIRST SESSION IN KINGSTON WITH ITS ASSEMBLY AND COUNCIL ELECTING THEIR PRESIDENTS AND ADOPTING AGENDAS

The International Seabed Authority began its twenty-first annual session in Kingston, Jamaica, this afternoon, with its two major organs – the supreme body, the Assembly, and the decision-making Council – electing their presidents and adopting their indicative work programme for the next ten days.

Ambassador Helmut Tuerk (Austria) was elected president of the Assembly. (See Biographical Note SB/21/3.) He was nominated by Spain on behalf of the Western European and Others Group.

Chile was nominated Vice President by Argentina on behalf of the Latin American and Caribbean Group, while the Republic of Korea was nominated by Singapore as Vice President for the Asia/Pacific group. However, as the African Group and the Eastern European Group had not yet decided on their candidates, the President postponed this agenda item to allow all four vice presidents to be elected at the same time.

The Assembly also elected two new members to the Finance Committee, Madimi Koteswara Rao (India) and Ye Minn Thein (Myanmar), following the resignations of their compatriots. Their terms will end on 31 December 2016. (ISBA/21/A/3 and ISBA/21/A/5).

Five organizations were granted observer status in the Assembly of the Authority. They are: the World Ocean Council, a non-governmental organization based in Hawaii, United States (ISBA/21/A/INF.1); the Sargasso Sea Commission based in Bermuda (ISBA/21/A/INF.2); the Fish Reef Project based in California, United States (ISBA/21/A/INF.3); the Pacific Community in place of Pacific Islands Applied Geoscience Commission, now subsumed by the Community (ISBA/21/A/INF.4); and the International Dialogue on Underwater Munitions based in The Hague, The Netherlands (ISBA/21/A/INF.5).

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Argentina, while raising no objection to the granting of observer status to the Sargasso Sea Commission, noted that the organization did not represent the international community as a whole.

The Assembly will begin its substantive work on 21 July with a debate on the annual report of Secretary-General Nii Allotey Odunton (Ghana) which he will present under article 166, paragraph 4, of the United Nations Convention of 10 December 1982. The report reviews a range of activities and programmes of the Authority since its last session and highlights its work programme for the year ahead.

Other issues on the Assembly’s agenda include consideration of a draft Terms of Reference for the conduct of the periodic review of the international regime of the Area under article 154 of the Convention.

The article provides for a five-yearly general and systematic review of the manner in which the international regime of the seabed Area had operated in practice following the entry into force (in 1994) of the Convention. Consequently, the Assembly might take or recommend that other organs of the Authority take measures, in accordance with provisions of the Convention, to improve the operation of the regime.

Council

The Council, meeting shortly after the Assembly’s adjournment, elected its president as well as four new members of the Authority’s expert body, the Legal and Technical Commission.

Elected president is Peter Thomson (Fiji) who is currently his country’s Permanent Representative to the United Nations in New York and Ambassador to Cuba. (Biographical Note SB/21/4).

In his opening remarks the President drew attention to the contents of the United Nation’s Post-2015 Development Agenda, and in particular its Sustainable Goal 14 (SDG 14) which calls for the conservation and sustainable use of “the oceans, seas and marine resources for sustainable development.” SDG 14 gives specific goals related to marine pollution, management of marine ecosystems and the conservation of marine protected areas. It further committed Member States to ensure the full implementation of the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea. He said the Council should never ignore the fact that its stewardship of the Area gave it high responsibility for the health of the ocean, the common heritage of mankind. The Authority must be able at all times to affirm that it had been true to the principles and purposes of the Law of the Sea.
The Council has scheduled two meetings for discussions of the Chair’s report on the work of the Legal and Technical Commission during its February and July 2015 sessions. Among the issues dealt with by the Commission are the status of contracts for exploration and related matters; procedures and criteria for the extension of an approved plan of work for exploration; and annual reports of contractors; and the development of a regulatory framework for the exploitation of polymetallic nodules in the Area.

Other agenda items for the Council include procedures for the election in 2016 of the members of the Legal and Technical Commission in accordance with article 163 of the Convention.

The Council will start its substantive work tomorrow afternoon, Wednesday 15 July, with the following on its agenda: a report on the status of contracts for exploration and related matters; report of the Secretary-General on the status of national legislation relating to seabed mining; and recommendations of the Legal and Technical Commission on procedures and criteria for the extension of an approved plan of work for exploration.

In a side event prior to the opening of the Assembly meeting, Belgian Contractor Global Sea Mineral Resources NV (GSR) presented an update on its first exploration cruise since a plan of work for the exploration of polymetallic nodules in the Clarion-Clipperton Fracture Zone (CCZ) was approved in 2012 and the contract signed with the Authority in 2013. The focus of this first cruise was to survey the entire claim area and based on the backscatter data, to take 10 box core samples. Furthermore, GSR recovered one tonne of nodules for lab testing. Later this year GSR will be go on its second cruise where it will start building the environmental baseline - in collaboration with Belgian universities - and do further geophysical and geotechnical work.

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