

International Seabed Authority

Press Release

Tenth Session
Kingston, Jamaica
24 May – 4 June 2004



Assembly (AM)

SB/10/9
31 May 2004

SEABED AUTHORITY CONSIDERS SECRETARY-GENERAL'S REPORT

The Assembly of the International Seabed Authority this morning began discussion of the report of the Authority's Secretary-General on the inter-governmental organization's activities for the past year and work programme for 2005-2007.

The Assembly also elected Bulgaria, Namibia and Vietnam as Vice Presidents of the Assembly, representing the Eastern European, African and Asian groups, respectively. The following States were appointed to the Credentials Committee: Austria, Brazil, Czech Republic, Ghana, Greece, Jamaica, Japan, Malaysia and Uganda.

At the outset of the meeting, the President of the Assembly, Dennis Francis (Trinidad and Tobago) announced the tragic passing at the weekend of the delegate from Germany, Helmut Beiersdorf. He said time would be set aside for tributes to be paid to his memory.

The Assembly is scheduled to continue its discussions of the Secretary-General's report on Wednesday, 2 June.

Introducing his report, Satya N. Nandan, the Secretary-General, described it as a recapitulation of the Authority's work since its inception in November 1994. With regard to the Council elections scheduled for Thursday, 3 June, he called for objective and transparent criteria to determine which States qualified for membership in the various groups that constituted the Council. The Council is to draw the list to guide the Assembly in its voting on Thursday.

Secretary-General's report

The Secretary-General's report (document ISBA/10/A/3) notes that the organizational phase of the work of the intergovernmental body - which is celebrating its tenth anniversary - was complete and the Authority had entered into a new, more

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substantive phase. In the next three years – 2005-2007 – the Secretariat’s work programme will continue to be focused on, among others, the Authority’s supervisory functions with respect to existing exploration contracts, the preparation of an appropriate regulatory regime for future development of the mineral resources of the international seabed Area, and the promotion and encouragement of marine scientific research there.

A key component in the Secretariat’s work during 2005-2007 will be the establishment of a geological model for the Clarion-Clipperton Fracture Zone (CCZ), the prime nodule-bearing area of the north-central Pacific Ocean. The Secretariat will also continue its efforts to expand the Authority’s Central Data Repository.

A workshop - the seventh in a series - to be convened from 6-10 September 2004, will consider the development of environmental guidelines for future exploration contracts for seafloor massive sulphides and cobalt-rich ferromanganese crusts deposits. Another workshop is planned during the three-year period to standardize the environmental data and information contained in the exploration code and in the recommended guidelines for the establishment of baselines for those two types of mineral resources.

Over the next three years, the Secretariat intends to explore the possibility of obtaining funding from the Global Environment Facility to assist further the international collaborative work required to manage environmental impacts from deep seabed mining. During the period, the Secretariat will continue to develop its central data repository to facilitate the dissemination of the results of marine research relevant to the future commercialization of the minerals in the deep seabed.

The Secretary-General’s report states that with the Authority’s organizational work completed, there was further scope to streamline its Secretariat and to strengthen its technical capabilities. These would be progressively implemented through 2005 and 2006 as current fixed-term contracts expire.

Citing the lack of a defined career structure typical of a small secretariat and the paucity of opportunities of employment for spouses, the Secretary-General reported a difficulty in attracting competent and experienced technical staff to the Authority. To address this problem, he proposed *to* explore the possibilities for seconding specialized scientific and technical staff from relevant national and international institutions to carry out specific projects within the scope of the Authority’s work programme.

Reviewing the activities of the Authority’s principal organs, the report says that the main difficulty of the Authority’s Assembly was securing broad participation in its work. Since 1998, there has been great difficulty in gathering the required quorum of

member States for meetings of the Assembly at Kingston. This low attendance also affects the membership in the Finance Committee and the Legal and Technical Commission: in the latter case, some members have not attended any meetings since their election to that body.

The establishment of a voluntary trust fund in 2002 for the purpose of defraying the cost of participation of members from developing countries, as well as an exceptional one-time authorization for the Secretary-General to advance up to \$75,000 from funds accruing to the Authority for the same purpose, had resulted in an increase in attendance. However, the situation remains a matter of grave concern that needs to be addressed.

The budget of the Authority, the Secretary-General noted, has seen very modest increases from year to year compared with other institutions. The 2003 budget was only 4 per cent larger than the 1999 budget, an increase of less than one per cent per annum. As set out in the Convention and the Agreement, the administrative expenses of the Authority is to be met by assessed contributions of members until it has sufficient funds from other sources to meet those expenses.

The Secretary-General reported that as at 31 January 2004, more than 99 per cent of assessed contributions had been received in respect of 1998 and 2001. Ninety-seven per cent had been received for 2002, and 87 per cent for 2003. Only 46 per cent of members had paid their 2003 contributions, the report adds. A total of 42 members of the Authority were in arrears for a period of two years or more as at 27 May 2004, jeopardizing their right to vote.

The report states that neither the Authority nor any single nation or institution has the financial, technological and intellectual capacity to undertake a global programme of scientific research of the magnitude required for the long-term epistemic management of the ocean environment or biosphere. It concludes that to be truly effective, international collaboration on a vast scale is required, involving scientists, researchers and organizations.

Discussion of report

The main topics discussed during debate on the Secretary-General's report included attendance at annual sessions, the supervisory functions of the Authority, its role in monitoring and preserving the marine environment, data collection and information management. Delegates also welcomed the emphasis of the Secretary-General's Report on marine scientific research which was a sizeable part of Authority's substantive work programme for 2005 to 2007.

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Greece, Indonesia, Namibia and New Zealand expressed concern at the difficulty in securing the required quorum of member States for meetings of the Assembly. Namibia said a lasting solution should be found to the problem of unattainable quorum at Assembly sessions. The representatives of Greece and New Zealand felt the issue was more specifically related to the ability of members to attend sessions annually.

Greece wanted the Secretary-General's report in 2005 to include suggestion on ways to approach the attendance issue. At the same time, Indonesia and Namibia called on members of the Authority to increase contributions to the voluntary trust fund used to help defray the cost of participation by developing countries in meetings of the Legal and Technical Commission and Finance Committee.

On the Authority's role in monitoring the activities of contractors and marine scientists, the representative from Namibia said marine scientific research in the Area, which only benefited contractors, would not enhance the principle of the resources being the common heritage of mankind. The member said the Authority was mandated to ensure the protection and preservation of the marine environment and biodiversity. As such, creation of a regime to regulate biological activity in the deep seabed should be a priority of the Legal and Technical Commission. This view was endorsed by Indonesia whose representative requested more details on the monitoring of contractors.

Indonesia also wanted more information on methods used by the Authority to monitor compliance with plans of work for exploration approved in the form of contracts. He also wanted to know more about trends and developments in the world market price of metals related to deep seabed mining activities.

New Zealand's representative, speaking on behalf of Pacific Forum countries, backed the Authority's proposed programme of work for the three-year period. She said supervision of existing contracts for exploration of polymetallic nodules, development of a regime for hydrothermal polymetallic sulphides and cobalt-rich crusts and standards for the protection and preservation of the marine environment were key aspects of the Authority's work plan.

Republic of Korea, in welcoming the report, was particularly impressed with the Authority's plan for development of standards for the protection of the marine environment and its ecosystems. On the monitoring of contractors, Korea expressed concern at the pace at which data collected during exploration activities is submitted to the Authority. He described data collected ten years ago, in a rapidly-changing technological world, as "historical data", and he recommended that the Authority

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develop standards that would be used to evaluate data from contractors. Korea said it was willing to assist the Authority with this process.

The representative of Fiji expressed concern that developing countries lacked technical knowledge to better participate in matters dealing with the prospecting and exploration of the international seabed. He called for the simplification of language and documentation on the subject. He suggested a publication similar to the “dummies” series, with a possible title “Understanding the Seabed for Dummies”.

All the delegates who spoke praised the Secretary-Generals Report as forward-looking and thorough. The Indonesian delegate said it could serve as a good-learning tool for the study of law of the sea. Some delegates, in expressing satisfaction with the work of the secretariat, hoped Mr. Nandan would continue to serve the Authority in his capacity as Secretary-General.
