

International Seabed Authority

Press Release



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SEABED AUTHORITY ORGANIZES BRIEFING FOR MEMBERS AND OBSERVERS ATTENDING ITS FIFTEENTH SESSION

An open briefing on current topics of interest to the International Seabed Authority was held this morning for members and observers attending its fifteenth session in Kingston.

The presenters were Mr. Mick Green, Chairman of the International Cable Protection Committee, who has more than 28 years experience in the submarine cable industry; Dr. Vijay Kodagali, an internationally recognized expert on multibeam swath bathymetric surveys, who currently serves as Scientific Officer and Marine Geologist at the Secretariat of the Authority; and Professor Jia Yu, currently Deputy Director of the China Institute for Marine affairs, and Deputy Secretary-General of the Chinese Society of the Law of the Sea.

Mr. Green, speaking on “Submarine Cables: What you need to know”, said that the importance of international communication to humanity had been recognized and enshrined in international law since 1884. Nevertheless, threats from human activities and natural hazards persisted.

There were opportunities for cooperation between the International Cable Protection Committee and the International Seabed Authority. One area was mutual notification and coordination to mitigate the potential threat. A single point of contact should be established by the Authority for submarine cable owners to inform about new cable routes. A joint working group should be established to identify potential areas where submarine cables and seabed mining could co-exist.

Earlier, Mr. Green said the International Cable Protection Committee had a mandate to provide leadership and guidance on issues related to submarine cable planning, installation operation, maintenance and protection. It monitored the evolution of international treaties and national legislation and helped ensure that submarine cables were fully protected. The Committee had 95 members including all major communications and cable companies. It also had representation from 54 countries.

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He said that submarine cables were covered by the United Nations Convention on Law of the Sea which gave birth to the International Seabed Authority. Submarine cables had priority status under the Convention, particularly in international waters. Ships engaged in the laying or repair of submarine cables had protected status under rules of the sea.

Tracing the history of modern means of communication, he said the first transatlantic cable carried telegraph messages at seven words per minute and cost twenty pounds sterling for 20 word message. This was in 1866. In 1948, telegram costs reduced to four pence a word for transmission across the Atlantic. In 1956, the first trans-Atlantic telephone cable initially had capacity of 36 telephone calls at a time with calls costing US\$12 for the first three minutes. In 1988, the first trans-Atlantic fibre-optic cable, had a capacity for 7,700 simultaneous phone calls, double that of the last copper cable. He pointed out that today each fibre pair within a cable had the capacity to carry digitized information (including video) equivalent to 15,000,000 simultaneous phone calls.

On submarine cable and the environment, he said professionally installed fibre-optic cables had a neutral to benign effect on the marine environment. Their small diameter meant that their 'footprint' was small, especially when compared to submarine pipelines. They were composed of non-toxic materials that were stable in sea water. They provided substrates for marine organisms. He said recovered cables sometimes yielded key specimens for scientific collections.

CCZ Model presentation

Some results of a project to develop a geological model for Clarion-Clipperton Fracture Zone (CCZ) Polymetallic Nodule deposit were presented by Dr. Vijay, an internationally recognized expert on multibeam swath bathymetric surveys and deep sea mineral exploration,.

The Authority commissioned the study to develop the model at its 2003 session in Kingston, and an approach to the project was formulated following a workshop in Nadi, Fiji that year to consider the various data that should be included. Its main objective was to improve Clarion-Clipperton resource assessment, integrate available resources and related environmental data, and provide useful guidelines for prospecting and exploration of deposits. Now in its second phase, the project has already produced a Geological Model of polymetallic nodules in the Clarion-Clipperton Zone and a prospector's guide for exploration that includes data and information on known deposits. The final results of the project will be presented at a workshop later this year when it will also be posted on the Authority's website.

In his presentation, centered on the area of interest (110° - 160° W; 0° - 20° N), Dr. Kodagali used bathymetric data and detailed maps provided by Pioneer Investors to highlight the morphology of nodules in the CCZ. He said resource data provided by contractors included nodule abundance and grade, and water column, tectonic, volcanic and biological proxy data. He said the Authority served as the link between the contractors, their scientists and the seven-member group of technical experts for the development of the geological model and prospector's guide.

The presentation also included tectonic sketches of the CCZ estimating the static and dynamic factors influencing the growth of polymetallic nodules in the CCZ; the growth model for the three types of nodules – S-type (smooth type), R-type (rough type), and S-R-Type (smooth-rough mixed type); and the coverage, morphology and distribution of nodules in the Eastern CCZ. Five different data sets of polymetallic nodule abundance and metal content were used in the modeling work, including both publicly available and proprietary data sets.

In a summary of resources estimation from biogeochemical modeling, Dr. Kodagali said more than 27 million metric tonnes of the metals are contained in the area of study.

The third presenter was Professor Jia Yu, Deputy Director of the China Institute for Marine Affairs (CIMA). Her presentation, entitled “Safeguarding the Common Heritage of Mankind”, began with a brief overview on the principle of the Area and its resources being the common heritage of mankind as set out in Articles 136 and 137 of the 1982 United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea.

The distinction between the extended continental shelf and the Area was outlined in the presentation: the Area was beyond national jurisdiction and as such no State shall claim or exercise sovereignty over any part of the Area or its resources. On the other hand the “extended continental shelf” was within the jurisdiction of coastal States in areas over which they exercised sovereign rights. The legal regime for the “extended continental shelf” was provided for in Part VI and Annex 2 of the Convention. An important principle was natural prolongation: if the submerged prolongation of the land mass of a coastal State went beyond 200 nautical miles, the State might make a submission to the Commission on the Limits of the Continental Shelf (CLCS). The CLCS was the body mandated to make recommendations to coastal States on matters related to their establishing outer limits of the continental shelf beyond 200 nautical miles.

Professor Jia said that the Commission on the Limits of the Continental Shelf had received 50 submissions from coastal States. She expressed doubts about the legitimacy of the claims made by some states, which contained “obvious deviations from the principles and relevant articles of UNCLOS.” According to Article 121, paragraph 3 of the Convention, “Rocks which cannot sustain human habitation or economic life of their own shall have no exclusive economic zone or continental shelf.” Some submissions to the CLCS made claims on the continental shelf using a remote, isolated and very small rock as the base point, she said.

The presenter expressed the view that the CLCS should not consider those submissions in which the coastal States made groundless claims of continental shelf. Using rocks to claim continental shelf constituted an “excessive claim” and an abuse of the right of the coastal States to establishing the limits of their continental shelf, she observed. Those excessive claims, she argued, would reduce the scope of the Area and its resources which were the common heritage of mankind.

Indonesia’s representative explained that four factors distinguished islands from rocks. Islands must: sustain and maintain fresh water; be able to grow vegetation that can sustain human habitation; produce some material that can be used for human shelter; and be able to sustain a human community of at least fifty people.

Leading the discussion following Professor Jia's presentation, the representative of Japan described it as a well-planned presentation "of a political nature". He said that the sessions of the Authority were not the appropriate forum for the discussion of individual submissions to the CLCS, since the Authority had no jurisdiction on those matters. By sending an official note to the Commission, China had already lodged its objections to the submission. The representative urged members not to allow the Authority to be used for political campaigning.

China's representative noted that Professor Jia had spoken in her capacity as an expert presenting her own views. The representative endorsed her assertion that safeguarding the common heritage of mankind was the joint responsibility of the members of the International Seabed Authority. His delegation had never considered the question a political one.

The Republic of Korea's representative suggested that the discussion of the issue in the Council was appropriate since the recommendations of the CLCS would eventually affect the work of the Authority. Cote d'Ivoire agreed that this was the ideal forum for the exchange of views on any matters affecting the protection and preservation of the common heritage of mankind. Uganda, speaking as a land-locked nation, pointed out that countries like his depended on the Authority to look after their interests.

The Council will this afternoon resume its consideration of outstanding issues relating to the draft regulations on polymetallic sulphides.

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