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Other matters

Review of the environmental impact statement submitted by the Ministry of Earth Sciences of the Government of India

Note by the secretariat

1. On 6 February 2020, the Secretary-General of the International Seabed Authority received an environmental impact statement from the Ministry of Earth Sciences of the Government of India relating to the proposed technical trials of a pre-prototype nodule collector in the Indian contract area of the Central Indian Ocean Basin. The technical trial will be conducted during 2021, as envisaged in the programme of activities for the period 2018 to 2022 under the contract for exploration for polymetallic nodules of India, which had been extended for a further five years. According to the statement, the objective of the trial is to test the capability of the machine in terms of locomotion, crushing, pumping and discharge within a limited area on the seabed. The contractor also proposes to collect environmental data before and after the trial and monitor the extent of impact on physico-chemical and biological conditions over a period of one year following the collector test.

2. According to the contractor, the statement was prepared on the basis of the recommendations for the guidance of contractors for the assessment of the possible environmental impacts arising from exploration for marine minerals in the Area ([ISBA/25/LTC/6](#)), referred to below as “the recommendations”. In this connection, it is worth noting that the statement was prepared and submitted prior to the approval by the Commission of the revised version of the recommendations contained in documents [ISBA/25/LTC/6/Rev.1](#) and [ISBA/25/LTC/6/Rev.1/Corr.1](#), referred to below as “the revised recommendations”.

3. Pursuant to paragraph 33 of the recommendations, the technical trial proposed by the Ministry is an activity that requires a prior environmental impact assessment, as well as an environmental monitoring programme to be carried out during and after the activity, in accordance with the recommendations contained in paragraphs 33 and 38. In line with paragraph 34 of the recommendations, the prior environmental impact assessment report, the information set out in paragraph 38 and the relevant environmental monitoring programme must be submitted to the Secretary-General at least one year before the activity takes place.



4. In accordance with annex I, paragraph 65, of the recommendations, the Commission will review the environmental impact statement for completeness, accuracy and statistical reliability.
5. To assist the Commission, the secretariat performed a preliminary review of the statement for completeness against the elements listed in paragraph 38 of the recommendations.
6. As a result of this preliminary review, the Ministry was requested to provide the following additional information:
 - (a) Summaries of physico-chemical and biological baseline studies, including brief summaries on the key parameters measured and the main results;
 - (b) A glossary and a list of abbreviations to aid the review of the document.
7. The Ministry responded in a letter to the Secretary-General dated 16 May 2020 by providing a 13-page addendum covering the following requested information:
 - (a) A summary of physico-chemical baseline studies covering the following key parameters and main results: bathymetric setting of the Central Indian Ocean Basin, atmospheric and sea-surface data, physical oceanographic properties in the water column, physical oceanographic parameters in the impact reference zone and preservation reference zone, chemical oceanographic properties in the water column in the Central Indian Ocean Basin, chemical oceanographic properties in the impact reference zone and preservation reference zone, physical properties of seabed sediments in the Central Indian Ocean Basin, sediment properties in the impact reference zone and preservation reference zone, chemical properties of seabed sediments and geochemistry of sediments in the impact reference zone and preservation reference zone;
 - (b) A summary of biological baseline studies covering the following key parameters and main results: marine birds and mammals, chlorophyll and primary productivity, phytoplankton, zooplankton, benthic megafauna, macrofauna and meiofauna and biological communities in the impact reference zone and preservation reference zone;
 - (c) A glossary and a list of abbreviations.
8. Noting that the environmental impact statement was prepared prior to the issuance of the revised recommendations, and taking into account the public consultations carried out by contractors and sponsoring States in the context of the environmental impact assessments submitted by the German Federal Institute for Geosciences and Natural Resources and Global Sea Mineral Resources in 2019 (see [ISBA/25/LTC/4](#)), as well as in anticipation of the adoption of the revised recommendations, the secretariat invited the Ministry to consider conducting a stakeholder consultation on the statement.
9. Subsequently, the Ministry announced a stakeholder consultation by publishing the statement on its website and inviting comments from the public. In parallel and with the consent of the Ministry, the secretariat issued a press release about the stakeholder consultation and provided a link on the website of the Authority to direct users to the Ministry website. The stakeholder consultation period was initially for 30 days, beginning on 15 March 2020. However, this was later extended for a further 40 days following representations from stakeholders and in the light of the coronavirus disease (COVID-19) pandemic. The Ministry has informed the secretariat that it will prepare a report on the outcomes of the stakeholder consultation and make it available to the Commission prior to its meeting in July 2020.

Consideration by the Commission

10. The consideration of the environmental impact statement, along with any other available information provided by the Ministry of Earth Sciences, has been placed on the agenda of the Commission at its July 2020 session.

11. It is suggested that, for the purpose of the review, the Commission takes into account, as a guide, the process for the review of an environmental impact statement as set out in the revised recommendations. Accordingly, the Commission is requested to:

- (a) Review the statement for completeness, accuracy and statistical reliability;
 - (b) Provide recommendations to the Secretary-General as to whether the statement should be incorporated into the programme of activities under the contract.
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