



Legal and Technical Commission

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Agenda item 10

Relinquishment of areas under contracts for exploration for polymetallic sulphides and cobalt-rich ferromanganese crusts

Request by the Government of Poland to defer relinquishment of part of its contract area

Note by the secretariat

I. Background

1. The contract for exploration for polymetallic sulphides in the Mid-Atlantic Ridge between the Government of Poland (the contractor) and the International Seabed Authority was signed on 12 February 2018.
2. Pursuant to regulation 27 of the regulations on prospecting and exploration for polymetallic sulphides in the Area ([ISBA/16/A/12/Rev.1](#), annex), the contractor is required to relinquish at least 50 per cent of the original area allocated to it by 11 February 2026, being the end of the eighth year from the date on which the contract was signed, and to relinquish at least 75 per cent of the original area allocated to it by 11 February 2028, being the end of the tenth year from the date on which the contract was signed.
3. By letter dated 30 April 2025 addressed to the Secretary-General, the contractor requested a two-year deferment of the first relinquishment to 11 February 2028 and of the second relinquishment to 11 February 2030 to enable it to better examine and understand its contract area and fulfil its contractual obligations.

II. Justification provided by the contractor for the deferment of relinquishment

4. The contractor explained that the impact of the coronavirus disease (COVID-19) pandemic and associated restrictions had significantly disrupted its exploration activities. A considerable part of its planned activities could not be conducted in a timely manner due to the limited number of cruise days in the North Atlantic Ocean, the reduced number of vessels and crew and the rising costs of conducting surveys



and scientific research. As a result, the execution of research cruises aimed at mapping and sampling within the contract area was postponed until pandemic-related restrictions were lifted and a sufficient number of days for exploration could be secured to carry out the planned activities. Consequently, the first research cruise targeting regional exploration was conducted in 2022, followed by a second research cruise in 2023 focused on detailed prospecting. The contractor indicated its intention to secure vessel time and resources to continue exploration activities during the second in situ research period in 2025, 2026 and 2027.

5. The contractor noted that another important unforeseen circumstance was the impact of the ongoing armed conflict that began in 2022, just beyond the eastern border of Poland (in the territory of Ukraine). This conflict has significantly affected global markets, resulting in changes in fuel prices, supply chain disruptions, price fluctuations and significant economic imbalances in Europe, and consequent high inflation (which in Poland exceeded 18 per cent at the beginning of 2023), which have had a significant impact on public spending capacity and led to a shift in government priorities.

6. The contractor also explained that, despite some clear obstacles, it had successfully conducted two research cruises that had generated key information about the contract area, aiding especially in the identification of prospective areas, namely oceanic core complexes. During the 2022 research cruise, the entire contract area was mapped, and geophysical surveys were conducted over an area of 10,000 km² of the ocean floor. The data collected included bathymetry, backscatter, water column data, seafloor characteristics and sub-seafloor sediment structure, as well as measurements of anomalies relative to the Earth's natural magnetic field (geomagnetic field) and oceanic crust using a magnetometer. For the first time, measurement data were obtained from hydrothermal fields, revealing high-temperature activity in the Broken Spur and low-temperature activity in the Lost City. In addition, two trainees from developing countries participated in the cruise in fulfilment of the contractor's training obligations.

7. During the 2023 research cruise, detailed high-resolution near-bottom research was carried out using an autonomous underwater vehicle over three prospective areas. These sites feature varied and challenging seabed configurations, complicating data acquisition. However, the use of advanced autonomous underwater vehicle technology enabled the collection of comprehensive data on the geological conditions and morphological structures of the seafloor. Analysis of acoustic anomaly intensity in water column data led to the detection of hydrothermal plumes (plume emissions), indicating new active hydrothermal systems.

8. The contractor reiterated its commitment to continue its exploration work in the Area. The contractor plans to conduct an environmental research cruise in 2025 utilizing a Polish vessel and scientists; and geological cruises in 2026 and 2027, including sediment sample collection and the use of an advanced remotely operated vehicle, an autonomous underwater vehicle and three-dimensional seismic acquisition for detailed examination of 19 prospective areas defined on the basis of a seabed morphology analysis within cluster A. The high-resolution, near-seafloor exploration work and analysis are scheduled to be completed by the end of 2027. This will provide sufficient data for the relinquishment of 50 per cent of the contract area.

9. The contractor indicated that, following the deferment of the first relinquishment, it will be necessary to accordingly defer the second and final relinquishment of 75 per cent of the original contract area from the original deadline, i.e. 11 February 2028, to the new deadline of 11 February 2030.

10. The request by the contractor is based on paragraph 6 of regulation 27, which provides that the Council may, at the request of the contractor, and on the recommendation of the Legal and Technical Commission, in exceptional circumstances, defer the schedule of relinquishment. Such exceptional circumstances shall be determined by the Council and shall include consideration of prevailing economic circumstances or other unforeseen exceptional circumstances arising in connection with the operational activities of the contractor.

III. Review by the Legal and Technical Commission

11. Pursuant to paragraph 6 of regulation 27, the Secretary-General notified the contractor that its request would be placed on the agenda of the forthcoming meeting of the Commission for consideration and recommendation to the Council.

12. The Commission is invited to consider the request by the Government of Poland to defer its relinquishment, taking into consideration the justification provided by the contractor, and to make a recommendation to the Council, as provided for in paragraph 6 of regulation 27.
