



President of the Intergovernmental Conference  
on an international legally binding instrument under  
the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea  
on the conservation and sustainable use of  
marine biological diversity of  
areas beyond national jurisdiction

5 March 2020

Excellencies,

I have the honour to refer to the fourth session of the intergovernmental conference on the conservation and sustainable use of marine biological diversity of areas beyond national jurisdiction (BBNJ) convened pursuant to General Assembly resolution 72/249, which is scheduled to take place at the United Nations Headquarters in New York from 23 March to 3 April 2020.

2 I have received the enclosed letter from the Under-Secretary-General for Legal Affairs and United Nations Legal Counsel (who is also the Secretary-General of the conference), in response to my queries regarding the possible impacts of the Coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) on the fourth session of the conference. In the letter, the Under-Secretary-General strongly recommended that consideration be given to postponing the fourth session of the conference, given the number of delegates expected to attend, in particular from abroad, and the duration of the session. The Under-Secretary-General also observed that due to the nature of the conference and given the critical stage of the process, it would appear that a conference in a reduced format may not be a viable option. The Under-Secretary-General also noted that any changes in the dates of the fourth session would require a decision of the General Assembly.

3 I have consulted the bureau of the conference, which supports my proposal to postpone the fourth session. In this regard, an informal meeting will be held on Monday, 9 March 2020, at the United Nations Headquarters in New York, at 3:00 pm, in Conference Room 2. The meeting will consider the proposal to postpone the fourth session, and agree on any recommendations that may have to be made to the President of the General Assembly.

4

Please accept, Excellencies, the assurances of my highest consideration.



**RENA LEE**

Ambassador for Oceans and Law of the Sea Issues

Special Envoy of the Minister for Foreign Affairs of Singapore

President of the BBNJ intergovernmental conference

Permanent Representatives of  
Member States to the United Nations  
Members of the specialized agencies  
Parties to the United Nations Convention  
on the Law of the Sea

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4 March 2020

Excellency,

I have the honour to refer to your letter to Mr. Jares regarding the impact of Coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) on the next session of the BBNJ intergovernmental conference scheduled to be held at UN Headquarters in New York from 23 March to 3 April 2020.

The Organization is taking appropriate and responsible measures in light of the spread of COVID-19, including with respect to upcoming meetings and conferences that will entail international travel for some of the attendees. As you have noted, most recently the Secretary-General advised the Chair of the Commission on the Status of Women of the COVID-19 related concerns. At the informal meeting of the Commission held on 2 March, it was agreed that the Commission will hold a meeting, attended by representatives based in New York, primarily to adopt certain already agreed decisions after which the session would be suspended until further notification. The meeting will not be opened for general discussion and all side events will be cancelled.

Assessments are being made on a case-by-case basis with respect to the forthcoming intergovernmental meetings scheduled to take place at UN Headquarters, taking into account the specificities of the meeting and the evolving circumstances.

I should emphasize that we are still in a very uncertain period regarding the nature and speed of the spread of COVID-19 and of the measures that the United States authorities may take.

Her Excellency

Ms. Rena Lee

Ambassador for Oceans and Law of the Sea Issues

Special Envoy of the Minister for Foreign Affairs

President of the BBNJ intergovernmental conference

Singapore

My staff and I have consulted with the relevant Secretariat offices, including our medical services who are in close contact with the World Health Organization, to assess the risks of hosting the fourth session of the BBNJ conference as scheduled. Given the number of delegates expected to attend, in particular from abroad, and the duration of the session, I would strongly recommend that consideration be given to postponing the fourth session of the conference. Due to the nature of the conference and given the critical stage of the process, it would appear that a conference in a reduced format may not be a viable option.

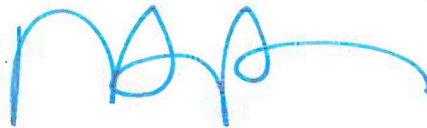
I would therefore encourage you to inform the Bureau as soon as possible of my recommendation and consult the Bureau on the matter.

In this connection, as the General Assembly set the dates of the fourth session of the conference in resolution 74/19, based on the decision contained in resolution 72/249, any changes in the dates of the fourth session of the conference would require a decision of the General Assembly. Accordingly, you may wish to write to the President of the General Assembly regarding your consultations with the Bureau and the Bureau's recommendation on the matter, so that the President could propose that the Assembly take a decision on the matter.

It would be important that the necessary decisions be taken as soon as possible so that government delegations and other stakeholders may adjust their plans accordingly.

My Office remains available to continue to provide support to you and the Bureau.

Please accept, Excellency, the assurances of my highest consideration.



Miguel de Serpa Soares  
Under-Secretary-General for Legal Affairs  
and United Nations Legal Counsel