Race Is On for New Head of OPCW

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Oliver Meier

- Candidates for OPCW Director-General

Seeking to avoid the rifts that marked its 2002 election of a director-general, the Organization for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons (OPCW) member states are aiming to choose a new head at a meeting next month.

The current chief, Rogelio Pfirter, is scheduled to step down in July 2010, when his second four-year term ends. OPCW directors-general are limited to two terms.

According to the OPCW media and public affairs office, the seven candidates are Benchaa Dani of Algeria, John Freeman of the United Kingdom, Peter Gottwald of Germany, Sudjadnan Parnohadiningrat of Indonesia, Aapo Pölhö of Finland, Anton Thalmann of Switzerland, and Ahmet Üzümcü of Turkey (table 1).

The OPCW’s Executive Council has set a goal of reaching a decision by its Oct. 13-16 meeting. Ambassador Jorge Lomónaco Tonda of Mexico is currently chairing the 41-nation council and facilitating the selection process. Member states are “working really hard for the [Executive Council] session in October to reach decision by consensus” on a single candidate, he said in an Aug. 8 interview. That candidate would then be recommended for election by the Nov. 30-Dec. 4 conference of states-parties of the Chemical Weapons Convention (CWC), the annual meeting and highest decision-making body of the 188 CWC parties. If the parties could not reach consensus on a new director-general, a two-thirds majority of votes would be sufficient in the council and the general conference. The rules of the general conference additionally require a quorum of more than one-half of all CWC states-parties present and voting.

The director-general heads the OPCW’s Technical Secretariat, which implements the CWC. He is in charge of administering a €75 million ($105 million) annual budget and manages a staff of 500.

According to diplomatic sources, the process of reaching agreement on a new director-general is burdened by the lack of a precedent for a routine, harmonious change at the helm of the OPCW. The United States, with the backing of many other Western countries, pushed for the ouster of Pfirter’s predecessor, José Bustani, OPCW’s first director-general, publicly accusing him of mismanagement. (See ACT, September 2002.) In the consensus-dominated world of multilateral arms control, the blunt approach of the Bush administration divided member states, with some key developing countries supportive of Bustani and most Western states pushing for his dismissal.

Similarly, the recent vote on a new director-general for the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) pitted nonaligned against Western countries, with the former generally backing South African candidate Abdul Minty and the latter largely supporting Japanese diplomat Yukiya Amano. Amano was eventually elected in early July, barely receiving the necessary two-thirds majority in the IAEA’s Board of Governors.

Lomónaco said member states are aware of these precedents. He emphasized that, during the selection process, he and OPCW members are “working hard to avoid politicization as much as
possible.” During the Executive Council’s February meeting, member states were asked to put
forward candidates in a national capacity rather than nominating candidates through regional
groupings. Lomónaco acknowledged that the CWC foresees a role for regional groupings in the
selection of many OPCW posts and that the convention emphasizes the importance of recruiting the
staff on as wide a geographical basis as possible. “But under the convention, this is not important for
the selection of director-general,” Lomónaco said. “Some interpret this as the intention of the
forefathers to avoid giving regional groupings a say in the selection of the director-general,” he said.

The candidates presented their vision of the priorities and challenges for the CWC, as well as their
ideas on management of the Technical Secretariat, during the July 15 council regular meeting. The
meeting was closed, but copies of the candidates’ presentations were made available to Arms
Control Today.

The seven nominees, all of them career diplomats, emphasized the need to implement the CWC in a
balanced manner, citing issues such as the timely destruction of remaining chemical weapons
stocks, nonproliferation, and cooperation. All the candidates vowed to build bridges among states-
parties, and many candidates pledged to continue to support the practice of zero nominal growth
budgets for the OPCW.

Lomónaco said he would start informal consultations “to identify early trends” that show which
candidates have the least support, in order to reduce the number of candidates, through voluntary
withdrawals, before the October council meeting. According to diplomatic sources, Lomónaco’s goal
might be difficult because nominating states could be reluctant to withdraw their candidate too
quickly after they entered the race for director-general. Also, the sources said, there appear to have
been no consultations among member states during the summer break.

Table 1: Candidates for OPCW Director-General

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Background</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Benchaa Dani (Algeria)</td>
<td>Dani has been Algeria’s ambassador to the Netherlands and permanent representative to the OPCW since 2004. Previously, he was director-general ad interim for American affairs and director of the America Department at the Algerian Ministry of Foreign Affairs (2001-2004) and ambassador to the Democratic Republic of Congo (1997-2000). He also has served at the Algerian mission to the European Union (1992-1996).</td>
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<tr>
<td>John Freeman (United Kingdom)</td>
<td>Since 2006, Freeman has served as deputy director of the OPCW. He previously served as the United Kingdom’s ambassador to the Conference on Disarmament (2004-2006), deputy representative to NATO (2001-2004), and representative to the United Nations in Vienna (1997-2001).</td>
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<tr>
<td>Peter Gottwald (Germany)</td>
<td>Gottwald was appointed in 2008 as commissioner of the federal government for arms control and disarmament at the Federal Foreign Office and was previously Germany’s ambassador to the United Nations in Vienna (2006-2008). Gottwald was also deputy head of the German embassy in Washington, D.C. (2003-2006), and director for North America at the Foreign Office in Berlin (1998-2002).</td>
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<tr>
<td>Sudjadnan Parnohadingrat (Indonesia)</td>
<td>Since 2006, Sudjadnan has been Indonesia’s ambassador to the United States. Previously, he was secretary-general of the Foreign Affairs Department in Jakarta (2002-2006), ambassador to Australia and Vanuatu (2001-2002), and director for international organizations (1999-2001). He chaired the 2004 Preparatory Committee meeting for the 2005 Nuclear Nonproliferation Treaty Review Conference.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Aapo Pölhö (Finland)</td>
<td>Since 2007, Pölhö has been Finland’s ambassador to Belgium and NATO. He served as director-general for Africa and the Middle East (2004-2007), as well as deputy director-general for political affairs (2002-2004) in the Finnish Foreign Ministry. He was also ambassador to Egypt and Sudan (1998-2002).</td>
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<tr>
<td>Anton Thalmann (Switzerland)</td>
<td>Since 2006, Thalmann has been deputy state-secretary and political director of the Federal Department of Foreign Affairs in Bern, responsible for Switzerland’s multilateral policies, including disarmament. Thalmann was also ambassador to...</td>
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Ahmet Üzümcü (Turkey): Üzümcü is currently Turkey’s representative at the Conference on Disarmament. Previously, he was Turkey’s representative to NATO (2002-2004), ambassador to Israel (1999-2002), and head of the personnel department at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (1996-1999).

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