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Opening Statement

by

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United Nations Under-Secretary-General

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at

**ITC Side Event: Transport and Connectivity Potential of the Caspian Sea Region:
Azerbaijan & Turkmenistan**

Wednesday, 26 February 2020

13:00

Room XIX

***Excellencies,
Ladies and Gentlemen,***

It is a great pleasure and an honour for me to join previous speakers in opening this round table discussion on “Transport Connectivity of the Caspian Sea Region”, co-organized by the governments of Azerbaijan and Turkmenistan with the support of the UNECE Secretariat.

As you are all aware, our region, hosts about 1/3 of the world’s landlocked countries, including some of the largest countries and some that are farthest from the open sea. The Caspian Sea region of course has tremendous economic and transit potential for inland transport operations between Europe and Asia, but it remains a landlocked region and the Caspian Sea is a landlocked sea. At UNECE we take the challenges faced by landlocked countries integrating into the global economy very seriously. In response we develop and support a broad range of relevant legal instruments.

UNECE is the custodian of 59 legal instruments and an increasingly global centre of UN inland transport conventions and agreements. The total number of contracting parties to these legal instruments today is 1,772. Of the 193 UN Member States, 149 States are contracting parties to at least one of these legal instruments.

One of these instruments is the famous TIR Convention, which is crucial for countries in our region to facilitate transit transport. A couple of weeks ago, governments adopted provisions providing the legal basis for paperless and fully automated operation of the TIR Convention (the so-called eTIR). This will open new applications for the TIR system, especially in the area of intermodal transport, for which the current paper procedure has proven cumbersome. This long-awaited revolution of the TIR system, debated among UNECE member

States for over 20 years, will not only provide a facilitated procedure for transport companies, but will also further secure the TIR system for the benefit of all customs administrations using it.

In addition to the provision of such tools, we focus our attention on harmonization of technical and regulatory standards, prioritization of infrastructure networks, development of corridors, capacity building, and cooperation between LLDCs and transit countries.

When it comes to capacity-building, one of the flagship initiatives of UNECE in the field of infrastructure connectivity is the Euro-Asian Transport Links project (EATL), which has recently concluded its third phase and will be continued in a next phase.

The EATL Project, launched in 2002, has made Euro-Asian transport a reality. Over the years, it has gathered public and private sector stakeholders from over 38 countries in Europe and Asia, including EU member States, landlocked countries in Central Asia and the South Caucasus, as well as non-UNECE countries in Asia such as Afghanistan, China, India, Pakistan and Mongolia.

This collective endeavour has resulted in a set of very tangible outputs, including:

- a) The identification of 9 rail and road links, 17 water transport links, 52 inland river ports and 70 maritime ports. **Several of these rail and road links transit through the Caspian Sea region, including via Azerbaijan and Turkmenistan;**
 - b) The prioritization of over 300 infrastructure investment projects on EATL routes;
 - c) The development of a detailed Geographical Information System database;
 - d) An in-depth analysis of non-physical obstacles to Euro-Asian
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transport, including the many obstacles relating to a lack of harmonization of technical standards and inter-operability;

- e) A comparison study between maritime and inland transport;
- f) Concrete efforts to operationalize the identified corridors by preparing common time schedules and tariffs.

Another UNECE-led initiative of direct interest to our discussions today is the creation of a Unified Railway Law. Once in place, it will enable railway operators to carry out their activity within a single legal regime along the entire East-West axis, connecting markets in Europe and Asia.

One of the key challenges towards sustainable infrastructure development in the Euro-Asian region is limited funding. UNECE is in the process of establishing an International Transport Infrastructure Observatory with the aim to facilitate preparation of bankable infrastructure projects. This web-based platform, developed in a GIS environment, will enable governments to retrieve the data to prepare, benchmark and present their transport infrastructure projects. Financial institutions, we believe, will use the Observatory to analyse projects on their economic feasibility.

Excellencies,

Ladies and Gentlemen,

Today's round table discussion on the Caspian Sea region is a very timely one. The region is undergoing a significant transformation. The newly constructed ports of Baku and the new port facilities in Turkmenbashi are expected to boost cargo volumes and handling capacities across the Caspian Sea, proving links also with their immediate hinterlands and strengthening economic development and employment opportunities along the entire Trans-Caspian (or middle) corridor and beyond.

The work towards untapping the economic and trade potential of the Euro-Asian has not yet been finalized. More efforts are needed and coordinated actions are required. We stand ready at the UNECE to continue providing our membership with the tools and instruments needed to do just that. Let us work all together to connect the Euro-Asian region more effectively and efficiently!

I wish us fruitful and future-oriented discussions today. Thank you for your attention.
