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Opening remarks

by

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at the

**Opening plenary session of the First Global Conference on Air Pollution and Health:
“Improving Air Quality, Combatting Climate Change – Saving Lives”**

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Excellencies, dear delegates, ladies and gentlemen,

It is my great pleasure to participate in the First Global Conference on Air Pollution and Health: Improving Air Quality, Combatting Climate Change – Saving Lives.

As we have heard already, air pollution remains the world's largest environmental health threat. To prevent people from falling sick, we have to tackle this problem together, in close cooperation with each other.

In the UNECE region, which spans from the US and Canada to Kazakhstan and the Russian Federation, we have done this for almost 40 years, and it has led to concrete results. Since 1979, member States in the region have been working together in the framework of the UNECE Convention on Long-range Transboundary Air Pollution, or the Air Convention for short. Other UNECE programmes, such as the Transport, Health and Environment Pan-European Programme, which we call THE PEP, also helps to reduce air pollution. We are happy to be co-hosted this Programme with WHO.

As a result of these efforts, people in the region today breathe cleaner air than 40 years ago. Health conditions have improved tremendously.

Nevertheless, many challenges still remain. The evidence that air pollution is harmful to human health is clear. But we need to continue working on the solution. And the solution can only be to further decrease the emissions of harmful substances into the air, which will lead to better air quality.

The experience of the Air Convention has shown that regional cooperation is key in reducing air pollutant emissions. Air pollutants do not recognize borders, and travel long distances from their point of emission. What might seem to be a local problem is in fact one that has effects across borders, and affects both neighbouring countries and those that are far away. This means that the problem cannot be solved at the local or national level alone. It has to be dealt with at all scales, the local, national, and importantly, the regional and global ones.

The importance of reducing air pollution has also been recognized at the global level, through the Sustainable Development Goals and our discussions in this and other international fora. One of the major questions in this discussion is how to improve cooperation. While the Air Convention is a regional instrument, other regions are looking to us for advice. We believe that the Convention as a framework is a

great model that could be replicated in other regions and the Convention can share its lessons learnt in this regard. We will have an opportunity to talk about this further during the high-level segment on the last day of this conference.

For now, let me conclude by saying: It was not that obvious that international cooperation to reduce air pollution among UNECE member States would succeed in the 70s and 80s, at a time when diplomatic relations in the region were not the easiest. Still, the Air Convention managed to make regional cooperation possible. This is encouraging for other regions that aspire to work together on better air quality.

Differences can be overcome and UNECE is happy to share its experiences in this regard.

With this, Excellencies, ladies and gentlemen, let me reiterate our ongoing commitment to combat air pollution and to support countries in creating an environmentally sound, healthier and sustainable world for the next generations. I wish us all a successful conference.

Thank you for your attention.
