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**Opening Statement by Mr. Ján Kubiš  
United Nations Under-Secretary-General  
Executive Secretary of the United Nations  
Economic Commission for Europe**

**at the Follow-up Meeting of the 2010 SPECA Economic Forum  
“Developing a Plan of Action to Strengthen Stability and  
Sustainable Development of Afghanistan through Regional  
Economic Cooperation in Central Asia”**

**(Ashgabat, Turkmenistan, 7 June 2011)**

Mr. Deputy Prime Minister,  
Excellencies,  
Distinguished Delegates,  
Ladies and Gentlemen,

It is my pleasure to address such a distinguished audience in the marvelous white marble capital of Turkmenistan, the country that presently chairs the United Nations Special Programme for the Economies of Central Asia. The Government of Turkmenistan displayed a high degree of initiative and responsibility for the economic development and stability of the whole region when it offered to host this discussion on strengthening regional cooperation between Afghanistan and Central Asia.

This event is follow-up to the 2010 SPECA Economic Forum held in Geneva on 18 and 19 October 2010, convened as a response to a statement by the representative of the Government of the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan at the 2009 SPECA Economic Forum, calling on the Programme to do more for strengthening cooperation between Central Asia and his country. The Geneva SPECA Economic Forum entitled “Strengthening Regional Cooperation in Central Asia: a Contribution to Long-term Stability and Sustainable Development of Afghanistan” held a broad strategic discussion on the subject.

The participants of the Geneva Economic Forum concluded that it was an important milestone in the efforts by the international community to promote peace

and economic development in Afghanistan in the context of subregional economic cooperation. They stressed the need to come up with new and enhanced initiatives offering economically viable approaches to the reconstruction and modernization of Afghanistan based on strengthened regional economic cooperation, noting that SPECA provides an important platform for the development of such initiatives.

A few days later, this message was reinforced by the Istanbul meeting of the Regional Economic Cooperation Conference on Afghanistan, which invited SPECA to join its Core Group and mentioned the Programme as an important forum for dialogue among the countries of the region. Last February, the Afghanistan Task Force of the G8 also invited SPECA to provide more active support to the strengthening of regional cooperation between Afghanistan and Central Asia.

This meeting has been organized by the Government of Turkmenistan and the UNECE in cooperation with UNRCCA and ESCAP as a response to calls for utilizing more actively the SPECA framework to mobilize the full potential of Central Asian countries to contribute towards the stabilization and sustainable development of Afghanistan. In turn, a more stable and prosperous Afghanistan will broaden economic opportunities for other SPECA member countries. Though SPECA activities may appear as modest in size compared to the large infrastructural projects of multilateral and bilateral donors, the Programme has its important niche. It offers a unique combination of capacity- and institution-building projects on the one hand and a framework for political consultations under a neutral UN umbrella, on the other.

Ashgabat is a particularly suitable venue for this discussion. Turkmenistan has been an active supporter of reconstruction efforts by the international community in Afghanistan. His Excellency President Berdymukhamedov in his speech last September at the United Nations General Assembly made a five-point proposal for the stabilization of Afghanistan, including assistance to Afghanistan in the development of transport infrastructure, the construction of the Turkmenistan-Afghanistan-Pakistan-India gas pipeline and an offer to increase electric power supplies to Afghanistan. President Berdymukhamedov invited the international community – represented by the United Nations – to discuss this proposal.

The visit of His Excellency President Karzai to Ashgabat a few days ago offered an opportunity for leaders of the two countries to discuss concrete steps to develop further bilateral cooperation between Afghanistan and Turkmenistan in such areas as the construction of the Trans-Afghanistan gas pipeline (TAPI), cooperation in power engineering, transport, communication and trade – areas that feature high on the agenda of our meeting today. Such mutually advantageous cooperation serves the interests of all SPECA member countries. Central Asia, a land-locked region, thousands kilometers away from any sea port, would greatly profit from reliable transit routes through Afghanistan to South Asia and to ports of the Indian Ocean. On the other hand, Central Asia can offer knowledge, expertise and know-how to Afghanistan as well as reliable technologies well-adapted to the conditions of the region. Two-way trade would be greatly facilitated by improved transport, border crossing, telecommunications and investment conditions.

The close historic, cultural, linguistic and religious links between Central Asian countries and Afghanistan do not only facilitate economic cooperation but also help

maximize its stabilizing effects. This meeting is a convincing demonstration that Central Asian countries are willing to take advantage of these links and actively contribute to the strengthening of stability and security of their region.

Looking into the future we can safely expect that civilian efforts to strengthen the stability and promote economic and social development of Afghanistan and the well-being of its people – among them regional economic cooperation - will play an increasingly important role in the coming years. The UNECE and its partners intend to make every effort to empower Central Asian countries through technical assistance within the SPECA framework to build a secure and prosperous future for the region.

This meeting is not intended to serve as a pledging conference. Its main objective is to develop further a partnership between SPECA, its partners and donors as well as other programmes and frameworks – like the Regional Cooperation Conference on Afghanistan or the Central Asia Regional Economic Cooperation group (CAREC). Through information exchange and coordination we hope to facilitate and strengthen bilateral, multilateral and regional cooperation between Afghanistan and Central Asia, to improve the delivery of international assistance. As part of this dialogue we will present you today and tomorrow a number of project proposals to demonstrate the potential of the United Nations Special Programme for the Economies of Central Asia to contribute to this joint effort.

We envisage using the outcomes of this meeting, including the project proposals to be presented later, as inputs for the drafting of a Plan of Action to Strengthen Stability and Sustainable Development of Afghanistan through Regional Economic Cooperation in Central Asia. This Plan of Action will then be integrated in the SPECA Work Plan for 2012-2013 which is going to be adopted by the SPECA Governing Council later this year here in Ashgabat under the SPECA Chairmanship of Turkmenistan. However, we don't see the Plan of Action as a one-off effort: it should become a flexible and efficient framework for developing, approving, implementing and evaluating projects that support the strengthening of economic links between Afghanistan and other SPECA member countries.

I wish all of us every success in this work.

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