



**UNITED NATIONS SPECIAL PROGRAMME FOR THE ECONOMIES
OF CENTRAL ASIA (SPECA)**

**REVIEW OF WORK IN THE SPECA FRAMEWORK
IN SUPPORT OF THE IMPLEMENTATION OF THE DECISIONS
OF THE FIFTH REGIONAL ECONOMIC COOPERATION CONFERENCE
ON AFGHANISTAN**

(Bangkok, Thailand, 26 November 2012)

REPORT

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

1. Participants, including high-level representatives of the Governments of Afghanistan and other Central Asian countries along with the Special Representative of the Secretary-General for Afghanistan, underlined the importance of the Regional Economic Cooperation Conference on Afghanistan (RECCA) and the United Nations Special Programme for the Economies of Central Asia (SPECA) in assisting Afghanistan through a portfolio of concrete projects. However, there is lack of donor attention. It was noted that financing is missing for viable projects presented at RECCA V despite political support at all levels by the countries of the region. There is a need to use more promising platforms to obtain support from potential donors. One option may be the Tokyo Conference and its set of approaches based on mutual accountability. The Istanbul Process is another option. Donors at the Tokyo Conference confirmed that they would align their activities and financing with national priority programmes (NPPs), many of which are covered by RECCA and some include SPECA projects. SPECA projects can play an important role in the implementation of several of the six confidence building measures (CBMs) adopted within the framework of the Istanbul Process. It is necessary to link SPECA activities and projects more directly with the Tokyo and Istanbul Processes.

I. Introduction

2. The side event “Review of Work in the SPECA Framework in Support of the Implementation of the Decisions of the Fifth Regional Economic Cooperation Conference on Afghanistan” was held in Bangkok on 26 November 2012 in conjunction with the 2012 SPECA Economic Forum “Strengthening Regional Economic Cooperation and Integration in Central Asia by Sharing the Asian Experience” and the seventh session of the SPECA Governing Council (Bangkok, 27-28 November 2012).

II. Participants

3. Participants included the representatives of Afghanistan, Azerbaijan, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan and Turkmenistan. Representatives of India, the Russian Federation, Turkey and Viet Nam as well as representatives of international and regional organizations and other partners participated as observers.

III. Opening of the meeting and adoption of the agenda

4. The meeting was chaired by H.E. Ambassador Esen Aydogdyev, Permanent Representative of Turkmenistan to the United Nations Office at Geneva.

5. The meeting was opened by Mr. Azizullah Omar, Deputy Director-General of Economic Affairs of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Afghanistan.

6. Mr. Azizullah Omar, in his opening statement, provided an overview of the Fifth Regional Economic Cooperation Conference on Afghanistan (RECCA V) held on 26-27 March 2012 in Dushanbe, Tajikistan. He recalled that RECCA V had been convened to further develop and consolidate cooperation and partnership in promoting peace and prosperity in Afghanistan and in the region. The Dushanbe Declaration adopted by RECCA V had underlined the importance of regional cooperation in Afghanistan's development. It was supported by high-level representatives of more than 40 countries and 30 international organizations. He noted that the Conference had acknowledged the special role that United Nations agencies and programmes played in the economic and social development of Afghanistan and its integration into global processes. Mr. Omar informed the meeting about progress achieved to date in the implementation of the 17 priority projects that RECCA V had approved.

A. Development through Building Infrastructure

Railways:

- Completion of Kolkhozobod – Panji Poyen (Tajikistan) and Shir Khan Bandar – Kunduz (Afghanistan)
- Completion of Jalalabad – Torkham railway project (Afghanistan, 75 km) - Landi Kotal (Pakistan, 23 km)
- Completion of Chaman (Pakistan) - Spinboldak (Afghanistan 11.5 km) railway project

Highways:

- Rehabilitation of Salang tunnel
- Upgrading and completion of the second lane of Kabul–Jabul Siraj Highway
- Completion of a segment of at least 100 km of 253 km of the Afghanistan Ring Road to connect Afghanistan to Turkmenistan and Tajikistan.

Energy:

- TAPI: Transmission of gas from Turkmenistan to India through Afghanistan and Pakistan. Several ministerial meetings were held, the prices between Turkmenistan, India and Pakistan have been agreed and negotiations between Afghanistan and Turkmenistan are under way. The progress on this project is considerable.
- CASA-1000 project — a general power supply line to be built in Tajikistan, Kyrgyzstan, Pakistan and Afghanistan. The first phase is being implemented on power purchase price agreement preparation.

B. Human Resource Development, Vocational Training, Labour Market Facilitation

- Establishment of a technical vocational training centre in Tajikistan for Afghanistan and the region is under way.

C. Investment, Trade, Transit and Border Management

- The good progress has been achieved. Afghanistan is negotiating various related issues with Tajikistan, Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan.

D. Disaster Risk Reduction

- Afghanistan supports establishment of a Regional Disaster Risk Reduction and Rehabilitation Center in Almaty, Kazakhstan.

E. Regional Fiber Optic Connectivity: Connecting Afghanistan's Fiber Optic System with Regional Fiber Optic Systems

- Good progress has been achieved. Afghanistan is now connected to all neighbouring countries.

7. Mr. Omar noted that progress in implementing these projects is limited and urged for additional support by donors and United Nations organizations.

8. H.E. Mr. Babamyrat Taganov, Deputy Minister of Economy and Development of Turkmenistan, in his opening statement, underlined that Turkmenistan fully supports all activities within the SPECA framework aimed at boosting the economic development of Afghanistan and strengthening regional integration through the development of regional transport corridors and trade facilitation. Turkmenistan intends to continue expanding its regional cooperation in the areas of energy, transport, communications and safe transit of energy resources. Turkmenistan has vast potential in exporting electricity to Central Asian countries and beyond, therefore it plans to construct new power generating capacities and transmission lines. Turkmenistan supports Afghanistan's rehabilitation by building economic and social infrastructure. Turkmenistan is also ready to review the question of increasing electricity export to Afghanistan and expanding its energy infrastructure to connect Afghanistan to its energy grid. A project on construction of the gas pipeline Turkmenistan-Afghanistan-Pakistan-India is being actively developed. A railway link between Turkmenistan and Afghanistan is also being built. Turkmenistan already serves as an important North-South transit hub and construction of the international railway New Uzen-Gyzylgaya-Bereket-Etrek-Gurgen is very important in this regard. Turkmenistan has already built 300 kilometres of railway track of the future transport corridor. It is supported by Iran, Kazakhstan and other countries. The participation of Turkmenistan in SPECA is fully in line with its development strategy and supports efforts to strengthen economic relations with other Central Asian countries. Mr. Taganov noted that SPECA serves as a good platform for strengthening regional integration and creating mutually beneficial cooperation between the countries of the region.

9. Mr. Sven Alkalaj, Executive Secretary of UNECE, in his opening statement, pointed out that the meeting not only reconfirmed the commitment of SPECA to the stabilization of Afghanistan, but more importantly, it is hoped that it would translate this commitment into practical and effective actions, including through increased donor support for project implementation. For many years, the Governments of Afghanistan and partner countries and international organizations have emphasized

the importance of regional cooperation to support the stabilization and sustainable development of Afghanistan, including the five Regional Economic Cooperation Conferences. The Istanbul Process to build a stable and secure Afghanistan gave a strong impetus to this process and helped to develop a new agenda for regional cooperation.

10. The Governments of member countries recognized the potential of SPECA to support regional economic cooperation between Afghanistan and other Central Asian countries at the 2010 Economic Forum held under the title “Strengthening Regional Cooperation in Central Asia: a Contribution to the Long-term Stability and Sustainable Development of Afghanistan”. Pursuant to a decision of the SPECA Governing Council at its fifth session (Geneva, 19 October 2010), several projects in support of closer economic cooperation between Afghanistan and other Central Asian countries were presented at the Follow-up meeting of the 2010 SPECA Economic Forum “Developing a Plan of Action to Strengthen the Stability and Sustainable Development of Afghanistan through Regional Economic Cooperation in Central Asia” in Ashgabat in June 2011.

11. UNECE provided assistance to the preparation and conduct of the Fifth Regional Economic Cooperation Conference on Afghanistan (Dushanbe, March 2012). The Dushanbe Declaration, adopted by the Conference, included several projects to be implemented within the SPECA framework. The “Heart of Asia Ministerial Conference” on 14 June 2012 in Kabul approved SPECA as an implementing framework for four out of seven confidence building measures. Mr. Alkalaj noted that piecemeal projects are unlikely to achieve sustainable involvement of Afghanistan in regional economic cooperation and integration with Central Asia. Instead, coherent and comprehensive regional actions are needed. SPECA has accumulated a significant portfolio of successfully implemented projects, with UNECE and ESCAP taking advantage of in-depth understanding of the advantages of regional economic cooperation, as well as obstacles that impede it. Afghanistan benefits from a number of SPECA projects, for example within the “Aid for Trade” Road map (adopted in December 2010), the UNECE project on the joint management of the upper Amu Darya by Afghanistan and Tajikistan, and the ESCAP project on strengthening economic ties between Afghanistan and neighbouring countries.

12. The Executive Secretary of UNECE mentioned three projects that are currently in need of funding: (a) the joint UNECE-UNCTAD project on improved customs data exchange between Afghanistan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan, which would bring immediate benefits; (b) a project on technical assistance to Afghanistan and its neighbours on implementation of the Customs Convention on the International Transport of Goods under Cover of TIR Carnets (TIR Convention) and accession of Afghanistan to the International Convention on the Harmonization of Frontier Control of Goods; and (c) a project on technical assistance to the development of Afghanistan’s rail organization to improve rail services.

13. Mr. Alkalaj expressed his hope that discussions at the side event would mobilize more support for project implementation within the SPECA framework, so that it could match political support expressed by high-level meetings and the Governments of SPECA member countries.

14. Mr. Shun-ichi Murata, Deputy Executive Secretary of ESCAP, in his opening statement, noted that current challenges have gained a transboundary nature which can only be overcome through regional ownership and cooperation. There are a number of international initiatives to support the development of Afghanistan — the Kabul Declaration on Good Neighbourly Relations of 2002, the Istanbul Process on Regional Security and Cooperation for a Secure and Stable Afghanistan, with SPECA being included in the Core Group of the Regional Economic Cooperation Conference in Afghanistan (RECCA) and tasked to play an active role in promoting regional

cooperation in the fields of trade and transport at the Fourth RECCA meeting (Istanbul, 2010). ESCAP fully supports the idea of bringing the United Nations agencies, funds and programmes into the Istanbul Process. Two ESCAP Subregional Offices – for South and South-West Asia and for North and Central Asia – support Afghanistan in its transition from conflict-affected to developing State.

15. Mr. Murata briefed the meeting about ESCAP activities to support Afghanistan with the many challenges it faces, such as support for Afghanistan in its application for WTO membership since 2004. As a landlocked country, Afghanistan faces additional constraints in accessing world markets due to poor access to the sea. ESCAP South and South-West Asia Office in collaboration with the ESCAP Subregional Office for North and Central Asia and ESCAP substantive divisions plan to work on the development of transport and economic corridors to improve access of Afghanistan to markets in the region through strengthening connectivity between Central Asia and South Asia. Mr. Murata briefed the participants on the ESCAP project aimed at strengthening economic ties between Afghanistan and neighbouring countries, which is implemented by the ESCAP Subregional Office for North and Central Asia.

16. The Deputy Executive Secretary of ESCAP emphasized the importance of the support ESCAP and UNECE jointly provide for the development of Afghanistan within SPECA. However, he noted, there is limited donor support for projects approved by high-level meetings. SPECA has been and should continue to be a platform which provides a valuable opportunity for enhanced political dialogue on various issues of regional concern. ESCAP is committed to supporting more streamlined and coordinated regional efforts within the Istanbul Process to promote the sustainable development of Afghanistan and the well-being of its people.

IV. Outcomes of 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, 7-8 June 2011)

17. Mr. Marton Krasznai, Regional Adviser, Economic Cooperation and Integration Division, and SPECA Deputy Coordinator at UNECE, informed participants that the follow-up meeting in Ashgabat was held based on a decision of the SPECA Governing Council at its fifth session, held in Geneva on 19 October 2010, which urged to do more for the stabilization and sustainable development of Afghanistan. A few days later, at the Fourth Regional Economic Cooperation Conference on Afghanistan, SPECA was recognized as a promising implementation framework for relevant projects. UNECE requested additional extrabudgetary funds in order to start these projects. At the follow-up meeting in Ashgabat, over 20 projects covering activities of the six SPECA Project Working Groups were presented by UNECE and ESCAP. This portfolio was narrowed down to those projects which promised to achieve rapid and tangible results. Trade, transport, water and energy were considered the most important and likely to bring the most value. Finding additional extrabudgetary funds has become a precondition for SPECA to succeed as the regional implementation framework. Mr. Krasznai informed the meeting about implementation of the UNECE project on the joint watershed management of the upper Amu Darya by Afghanistan and Tajikistan and the decisions taken at the project meeting held in Dushanbe from 27 to 30 March 2012. In September 2012, UNECE, the World Bank and the Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation agreed on a long-term programme for water information management for Central Asia. It is expected that this will be a large regional project involving Afghanistan and will possibly draw tens of millions of dollars in investment for, among other things, measuring equipment, data-processing computers, modelling software. The bilateral Afghan-Tajik project will complement this large regional project. In addition, a UNECE Liaison Officer was deployed to Dushanbe to prepare

the Fifth RECCA meeting, where the approach of the SPECA Ashgabat follow-up meeting to take up small well-targeted projects was adopted.

V. Review of progress in the implementation of the decisions of the Fifth Regional Economic Cooperation Conference on Afghanistan (Dushanbe, 26-27 March 2012)

18. H.E. Mr. Nizomiddin Zohidov, Deputy Minister of Foreign Affairs of Tajikistan, noted that the Government of Tajikistan is convinced that sustainable development of Afghanistan can only be ensured through its involvement in regional integration processes, including transport and trade cooperation with its neighbouring countries. The Fifth RECCA meeting in Dushanbe approved 17 projects in various fields to contribute to the stabilization and sustainable development of Afghanistan. Tajikistan is involved in a number of these projects:

(a) By the end of 2012, a feasibility study on Tajikistan segment of the railway line between Kolkhozobod – Panji Poyen – Shir Khan Bandar – Kunduz will be completed. Currently an agreement on a border crossing point is being negotiated;

(b) Tajik and Afghan experts have concluded a preliminary study on gas extraction and possibility of constructing a gas pipeline from Sheberghan city in Northern Afghanistan to the Tajik border. Currently specialists are preparing an agreement which is expected to be endorsed by the end of 2012;

(c) The possibility of extending the power transmission line Sangtuda (Tajikistan) – Puli Khumri (Afghanistan), commissioned a year ago, to other provinces of Afghanistan;

(d) There are regular meetings of experts on progress in implementation of the CASA-1000 Project. The Working Groups are established in the line ministries of Afghanistan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan and Pakistan. The Secretariat of CASA-1000 was established in Almaty, Kazakhstan;

(e) It is planned to establish a technical vocational training centre in Tajikistan for Afghanistan and the region (in the areas of mining, railways, construction, operation, maintenance, disaster risk management and health care, among others) for 1,000 to 3,000 students from Afghanistan during one year. Unfortunately, this project lacks financing and attention from donors.

19. A special Tajikistan-Afghanistan Working Group on monitoring the implementation of the projects approved at the Fifth RECCA meeting was established. Mr. Zohidov urged international organizations and donors to provide financing to the above-mentioned projects. He noted that Tajikistan is satisfied with the development of the Istanbul Process and that the activities and projects of the RECCA V compliment the CBMs approved by the “Heart of Asia” Ministerial Conference, held in Kabul in June 2012.

20. Mr. Abdul Halim Quarizada, Member of RECCA Desk, Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Afghanistan, emphasized the importance of regional cooperation. He reminded participants that the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Afghanistan has a special Center for Regional Cooperation which strives to coordinate the efforts of the international community aimed at rebuilding Afghanistan and works closely with national line ministries.

VI. Outcomes of the “Heart of Asia” Ministerial Conference (Kabul, 14 June 2012) and the Tokyo Conference on Afghanistan (Tokyo, 8 July 2012)

21. Mr. Ján Kubiš, Special Representative of the Secretary-General for Afghanistan and Head of the United Nations Assistance Mission in Afghanistan (UNAMA), presented the report. Mr. Kubiš reiterated the importance of the Tokyo and Kabul Conferences and proposed to put them in a broader perspective, which is transition of Afghanistan to full sovereignty when the country assumes full responsibility for all matters, including cooperation with other countries and strengthening regional cooperation to benefit and improve the lives of its people. There are a number of crucial transition issues in Afghanistan: (a) security transition, where the Conference in Chicago played an important role; and (b) political transition, which is currently centred on the presidential elections in Afghanistan in 2014. The Government and respective institutions of Afghanistan have confirmed that the presidential elections will be held in April 2014, which is a major commitment. There are increasing efforts towards peace and reconciliation, including strengthening bilateral and multilateral cooperation.

22. Mr. Kubiš emphasized the importance of RECCA and SPECA as important players in assisting Afghanistan through a portfolio of concrete projects and efforts. However, there is lack of donor attention, and financing is missing for viable projects despite political support at all levels by the countries of the region. Therefore, there is a need to use more promising platforms to get support from the donors. One of them is the Tokyo Conference and its set of approaches based on mutual accountability, as well as the Istanbul Process. Both the Tokyo Conference and the Istanbul Process have strong political support from donors – countries and international financial organizations. Mr. Kubiš urged SPECA member countries and RECCA countries not to miss the opportunity and use the political momentum behind these two processes to get funding for already well developed and well substantiated projects which have expressed support from the region. Donors at the Tokyo Conference confirmed that they would align their activities and financing with the national priority programmes (NPPs), many of which are covered by RECCA and some include SPECA projects. Therefore, it is necessary to talk to donors to obtain financing for projects and programmes which fall under NPPs. With regard to the Istanbul Process, there are six confidence building measures (CBMs), a number of which are relevant for RECCA and SPECA projects. The CBMs benefit from strong commitment and obligations of participating countries and lead nations in terms of developing action plans. Those countries will report on concrete actions at the meeting in Baku at the end of January 2013. Mr. Kubiš urged SPECA to approach donors with project proposals. Donors at the meeting in Kabul in November 2012 made it clear that they are ready to provide financial support. It is necessary to link RECCA and SPECA activities and projects with the Tokyo and Istanbul Processes. Mr. Kubiš also urged SPECA to more actively use international financial institutions, namely ADB and its CAREC programme, as well as the Shanghai Cooperation Organization. Mr. Kubiš reiterated that proactive efforts need to be undertaken to obtain financing for SPECA projects from donors through the Tokyo Conference and the Istanbul Process. UNAMA is ready to provide full support to ESCAP, UNECE and SPECA in its activities.

VII. UNRCCA activities in support of regional cooperation in Central Asia

23. Mr. Armands Pupols, Political Affairs Officer, United Nations Regional Centre for Preventive Diplomacy for Central Asia (UNRCCA), informed participants that the activities of the UNRCCA are aimed at supporting economic development in Afghanistan and the region, as well as the integration of Afghanistan in the regional economic processes. The UNRCCA mandate is quite broad and is a platform for dialogue and exchange of opinions between Central Asian countries with a view to helping them seek and develop mutually acceptable solutions. It promotes a dialogue

between the Governments of the Central Asian countries in finding solutions for emerging problems and eliminating potential threats. The UNRCCA Programme of Action includes three areas: (a) the water and energy nexus as a great many challenges are in this area; (b) transboundary challenges, stemming from the situation in Afghanistan and its implications in Central Asian States; and (c) internal developments in the countries which might have a spillover effect in the region. With regard to Afghanistan, UNRCCA aims to involve Afghanistan in all three areas and engage in ongoing activities, including transboundary water management issues, data management, early warning systems, etc. The fight against extremism and terrorism is another area for engaging Afghanistan through the United Nations Global Counter-Terrorism Strategy. UNRCCA views the Istanbul Process as a good platform for engaging Afghanistan in regional cooperation and integration and participates actively in counter-terrorism and counter-narcotics CBMs. Mr. Pupols urged Central Asian States to take active part in the CBMs as well. UNRCCA recently hired a consultant who helped to develop different scenarios in Central Asia depending on the situation in Afghanistan.

VIII. Overview of UNECE and ESCAP projects and project proposals presented during 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, 7-8 June 2011), the Fifth Regional Economic Cooperation Conference on Afghanistan (Dushanbe, 26-27 March 2012), and the “Heart of Asia” Ministerial Conference (Kabul, 14 June 2012)

24. Mr. Nikolay Pomoshchnikov, Head of the ESCAP Subregional Office for North and Central Asia, presented the ESCAP project. He informed the meeting that the project seeks to support the development of Afghanistan by promoting mutual economic ties, reduce barriers to trade, and increase the joint activities of entrepreneurs from Afghanistan and other Central Asian countries as well as the Russian Federation. The project strategy involves the analysis of possible economic projects at national level, followed by regional level activities to identify, select and promote economic projects. Two regional workshops are planned with participation of experts, officials and entrepreneurs from Afghanistan, Central Asian countries, the Russian Federation and other countries. The key stakeholders for this project include senior policymakers responsible for economic development, and expert and business communities in Afghanistan and Central Asian countries. The project strategy involves developing new projects in Afghanistan and neighbouring countries leading to increased local production, joint ventures and employment generation, especially among women; raising awareness and support from the government for the joint projects and regional cooperation to support development of Afghanistan; identifying, selecting, promoting and implementing new joint economic projects in Afghanistan with a focus on regional cooperation as well as gender mainstreaming. The first workshop “Strengthening trade and economic relations between Afghanistan and Central Asia” was held in Mazar-i-Sharif, Afghanistan, on 14 and 15 November 2012. The workshop discussed issues of economic cooperation and future directions for the implementation of regional and bilateral trade and economic projects in Central Asia, and the Russian Federation, for the economic development of Afghanistan, eliminating barriers to trade between Afghanistan and Central Asian countries, participation of the business community in Afghanistan's economic development, perspectives and effective areas of investments in regional and bilateral economic projects. The Governor of Balkh Province, about 50 senior government officials, members of parliament, experts and private business representatives from Afghanistan's capital and provinces, Kazakhstan, Tajikistan, Uzbekistan and the Russian Federation participated in the workshop. Special attention was given to attracting women participants. The participants also proposed about 60 projects in the areas of agriculture (production and processing), trade, road construction, irrigation, pharmacy, horticulture and education.

25. Mr. Mario Apostolov, Regional Adviser, Trade and Sustainable Land Management Division of UNECE, presented a project on Customs Data Exchange between Afghanistan and Tajikistan. This is a joint UNECE and UNCTAD project which aims at improved exchange of customs data (transit, import/export, enforcement) between Afghanistan and Tajikistan; facilitation of legitimate trade through effectively operational customs transit corridors; and increased operational capacities of customs administrations to fight against illegal trade and trafficking in the SPECA region. Afghanistan is making continuous efforts aimed at the development and simplification of trade and customs procedures. The project is developed for all SPECA member countries, but a pilot project is implemented with Tajikistan. The idea is to develop an agreement between Afghanistan and Tajikistan on simplified automated customs data exchange on the basis of advance data submission on about 17 data elements instead of 110 currently in use. The customs data will be processed through special IT tools and harmonized with international standards. UNCTAD and UNECE have the required experience and expertise for assisting the two countries. UNCTAD is implementing the ASYCUDA data processing system in Afghanistan. UNECE has been developing international standards and tools for trade data exchange and automation for decades. Joint efforts of UNCTAD and UNECE in the areas of data harmonization will multiply the effect of the proposed project.

26. Mr. Marton Krasznai, Regional Adviser, Economic Cooperation and Integration Division, and SPECA Deputy Coordinator at UNECE, presented three additional UNECE projects:

(a) Implementation of the TIR Convention by Afghanistan. Mr. Krasznai noted that access to foreign markets is crucial for Afghanistan's economic development and this is where the TIR convention comes into the picture. Afghanistan is about to start the TIR system very soon, whereas all its neighbouring countries, except Pakistan, already are parties. The project would improve the effectiveness of Afghanistan's customs authorities and related parties in implementing the TIR Convention, as well as benefit other Central Asian countries through the more efficient implementation of the TIR Convention. Afghan goods would be delivered much more rapidly, and fewer illicit goods would be transported.

(b) Another proposed project would facilitate the participation of Afghan experts in activities and joint training on the management of water resources and protection of the environment which are taking place in Central Asia. As the UNECE is implementing many water, energy and environment-related regional projects, the more extensive involvement of Afghanistan in these projects would be logical. These projects include such issues as dam safety, water quality cooperation, integrated water resources management, strengthening the legal basis and institutional capacity for water cooperation, etc. The project would facilitate the participation of Afghan officials and experts in meetings and training activities taking place in Central Asia. This would help not only build capacity but also facilitate more interaction with colleagues from other countries of the region.

(c) The last project is on technical assistance to Afghanistan's rail network development. The project will help the Government of Afghanistan to develop a railway organization that will manage and maintain the rail network of the country and provide full rail and intermodal services in the area. Other objectives of the project proposal include fostering cooperation with regional organizations and state rail organizations of the neighbouring countries; developing a corridor management mechanism and integrated rail services that will connect China and Central Asian countries through Afghanistan with the ports of the region. This project will need support and commitment from the participating countries and donors.

IX. Closing of the meeting

27. The side event was closed following conclusions by the Co-Chairpersons, emphasizing that the meeting would provide a strong impetus to work within the SPECA framework in support of regional economic cooperation in Central Asia and the stabilization and sustainable economic development of Afghanistan.
