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Statement

by

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at

**the opening of the seventh session of
the Meeting of the Parties to the Convention on the Protection and Use of
Transboundary Watercourses and International Lakes**

Budapest,

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Excellencies,
Distinguished Guests,
Ladies and Gentlemen,

I would like to express my gratitude to Hungary, not only for hosting this meeting, but also for its political leadership and active engagement in the implementation of the Convention on the Protection and Use of Transboundary Watercourses and International Lakes (Water Convention) and the promotion of transboundary cooperation.

Two years ago, Hungary hosted the Budapest Water Summit, which was an important milestone towards the adoption of a Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) dedicated to water and sanitation in the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. Now, once again Hungary is hosting a historic moment for global water issues.

Indeed, this is an extraordinary time for transboundary water cooperation. In recent years, we have witnessed a series of unprecedented breakthroughs. First, international water law was greatly strengthened by the entry into force, in 2013, of the amendment opening the Water Convention and, in 2014, of the Convention on the Law of the Non-navigational Uses of International Watercourses (Watercourses Convention). Then — just two months ago — the adoption of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development clearly recognized the key role of water for sustainable development, including transboundary water cooperation. Never before has the global political commitment to the issue been expressed at such a high level.

But one key piece of the puzzle is still missing: an indicator to measure the progress of transboundary water cooperation in the context of the 2030 Agenda. As you know, negotiations are ongoing in the framework of the United Nations Statistical Commission to define the set of indicators that will be used to measure progress on the Agenda. Many countries have been advocating for the inclusion of an indicator on transboundary water cooperation, and this is also the case for the 31 United Nations

organizations that are coordinating their inputs to the process under the umbrella of UN-Water. Without such an indicator, it will be difficult to monitor progress. I therefore encourage all countries to support the inclusion of an indicator for transboundary cooperation.

If the stars are aligned for water cooperation, it is not an astrological coincidence. It is a sign of the recognition of the critical importance of water. The stakes are high and the risks immense. Projections suggest that by 2030 nearly half the global population could be facing water scarcity and demand could outstrip supply by 40 per cent.

What we are witnessing today is already extremely alarming: 2015 is the hottest year on record. There is a widespread drought alert on all continents. Drought is hitting Central and Eastern Europe particularly hard. In the Czech Republic, the hop harvest is expected to drop 34 per cent this year because of the drought. On the Rhine, navigation is still limited owing to low water levels. In Asia, there are drought conditions from Western Asia through the central and eastern Russian Federation, and also in South-East Asia and on the Indian subcontinent. In some areas of southern India the land is too dry for farmers to plough. In Africa, drought remains entrenched across the equatorial region and through much of the South, and Ethiopia and South Africa have declared a drought disaster. In the United States, the drought in California will cost the state's economy \$2.7 billion this year alone and nearly 21,000 jobs.

Climate change will strike the world primarily through water – too much water or too little water. I may force millions of more people to move and migrate but the mere prediction of scarcity or flooding can also facilitate that countries and communities all over the world come together into new and constructive forms of cooperation. This is the spirit which the Water Convention has been established upon. As most of the world water resources are transboundary, cooperation is a must to face these growing challenges.

And there is not only bad news; some remarkable progress has also been made in recent years. Mexico and the United States negotiated Minute 319, showing how an existing transboundary agreement can be adapted to new circumstances such as climate change. Egypt, Ethiopia and Sudan have negotiated an agreement on the Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam on the Nile River. Jordan and Saudi Arabia have agreed on how to protect the precious groundwaters in the Al-Sag/Al-Disi Layer. In the UNECE region, with our support and that of our partners, cooperation between Afghanistan and Tajikistan has been formalized and data exchange has been established; Belarus and Lithuania have negotiated a bilateral protocol on transboundary cooperation on the Neman basin; and the negotiations between Azerbaijan and Georgia on the Kura River are near finalized.

Still, 60 per cent of international watercourses lack cooperative management arrangements. Many agreements are negotiated but not in force, or not implemented properly. We need a leap forward and that is where the Water Convention can play a catalytic role.

Like all political processes, water cooperation has a long and complicated path, with many obstacles, setbacks and sudden accelerations. In most situations, conflict and cooperation co-exist. The framework of the Water Convention offers something invaluable in this respect: a long-term perspective. Contrary to specific projects and initiatives, the Convention does not have an end date.

In this marathon, you have always been front-runners, anticipating approaches that others have been following and responding quickly to emerging needs. When you started working on adaptation to climate change in the transboundary context, back in 2006, nobody was working in this area. Similarly, the pioneering work on the water-food-energy-ecosystem nexus that will be launched here is the first comprehensive attempt to study the nexus in the transboundary context. The policy guidance note on the benefits of cooperation that you will adopt at this session is another innovative tool that will help countries to fully realize

the potential benefits of cooperation, including by uncovering previously overlooked benefits and identifying opportunities arising from increased cooperation. So, in many respects, you are trendsetters and you offer a unique platform for partners engaged in similar efforts.

Also in relation to the implementation of the 2030 Agenda, your accumulated experience of working across political and sectoral boundaries will be an extraordinary.

By opening the Water Convention, you are once again showing great vision. The experience and the intergovernmental platform offered by the Water Convention are more than ever needed to address the multiple challenges facing water resources. The globalization of the Convention is a great opportunity for both UNECE and non-UNECE countries. It can provide a global forum — a home in the United Nations system, as the Deputy Secretary-General called it — to discuss these challenges and to position transboundary water issues high on the political agenda. Jointly, we can create a global coalition to address transboundary water resources management problems. Only by uniting forces between countries, international organizations, financing institutions, non-governmental organizations (NGOs), academia and the private sector will we be able to broaden the exchange of experience and mobilize the needed political support and funding for transboundary water cooperation.

I would like to say few words about the relationship between the Water Convention and the Watercourses Convention. Unfortunately, there has been a lot of confusion and misconceptions, and the discussions are sometimes framed in terms of competition between the two Conventions. “Which one is better? Which one should prevail?” These are actually misguided questions and the either/or dichotomy is wrong. Let me be clear: We are talking about two conventions that promote cooperation. Several studies confirm that the two Conventions are fully compatible and harmonized and are based on the same principles, and that the minor differences between the two constitute useful complementarities. Many countries are Parties to both Conventions or are considering acceding to

both. I very much hope that the informal discussions among Parties to the Watercourses Convention that have recently taken place will help dispel such misinterpretations. Because, if we count the number of Parties to both Conventions, there are only 59 countries that have committed to abide by their principles. This is not enough. We need to join forces if we want to build the needed critical mass. We cannot afford fragmentation or duplication of efforts.

Besides timeliness and responsiveness to emerging needs, you have taken bold decisions that enrich and strengthen the Water Convention. You were bold three years ago in establishing the Implementation Committee. And you are about to display similar determination by adopting new decisions on reporting and on general issues of implementation.

Reporting will give you one more tool to review progress, identify hot spots and common challenges and guide work under the Convention, as well as that of other concerned actors, on transboundary water management. It will also be valuable in monitoring progress towards the SDGs.

Through the general decision on implementation, you reaffirm that cooperation per se is not enough and that reasonable and equitable use and the prevention, control and reduction of transboundary impact are equally important. Where cooperation perpetuates existing problems rather than addressing them, something more needs to be done. Complacency is not an option.

With your wise, timely decisions you have built a unique framework that brings together water practitioners, politicians, lawyers, economists, diplomats, academia and civil society. That is indeed a comprehensive framework under which policy work, assistance and work on the ground, capacity-building, exchange of experiences and water diplomacy are closely interwoven and support each other. The next challenge is to maintain all the positive features of the Convention as it goes global. You have all the keys to success.

The broad participation from countries outside the UNECE region today and in the past three years demonstrates the potential, interest and expectations. This enrichment of the Convention's work holds the potential for even greater benefits in the future. I very much look forward to welcoming the first country outside the UNECE region as a Party to the Convention.

The package of decisions that you will adopt in the coming days is a formidable foundation for the Convention's globalization. The strategy for the global Convention that will be developed in the next three years with the broad involvement of Parties, other States, including countries outside the UNECE region, and partners will ensure that all countries have strong ownership and that the needed synergies with partners are established. UNECE stands ready to continue supporting to the promotion of the sustainable management of transboundary water resources worldwide.

None of the past achievements would have been possible without the high level of commitment from Parties as well as supporting organizations. I would therefore like to thank all those countries and organizations that have led activities and contributed in kind or in cash to the Convention's trust fund.

Distinguished Ministers, Excellencies, Ladies and Gentlemen, I wish you success in your deliberations.

Thank you.
