

International conference on “Europe-Asia Transboundary Water Cooperation”
Geneva, 15 December, 10 a.m., room V

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“Cooperation between Europe and Asia on transboundary waters —
key to regional stability”

Thank you, Madam Chair
Mr. Deputy Executive Secretary
Excellencies
Ladies and gentlemen:

It is a pleasure to welcome you on behalf of the Director-General of the United Nations Office at Geneva, Mr. Kassym-Jomart Tokayev, who would very much have liked to be with you today, but is representing the Secretary-General, Mr. Ban Ki-moon, at the 20th anniversary of the independence of Kazakhstan. Let me, first of all, thank the organizers – the UNECE – and our Host Country, Switzerland, for this very timely initiative.

The coming two days of dialogue focus on a key issue for your region: cooperation on and sustainable use of the water resources that lie at the border between Europe and Asia. These waters are important for drinking purposes, irrigation, hydropower generation, and industry. As most of these waters are transboundary, effective cooperation is key to social, economic and environmental development, and also for security and regional stability. Therefore, the scale of potential cooperation on these matters is immense.

The recent publication of the UNECE's second assessment of Transboundary Rivers, Lakes and Groundwaters gives cause for optimism. But, it also highlights the need for much more concentrated work. Population growth, economic development and a host of other factors put an ever growing pressure on water resources: demands from agriculture, mining, energy production, industry development and drinking water supply are increasing. The region is one of the most vulnerable worldwide to climate change. Glacier melting, in particular, is expected to have serious impacts. Thus balancing multiple water uses equitably and reasonably at the national and transboundary level is already a major challenge and is likely to grow.

Many countries in the region face difficulties in achieving the Millennium Development Goals in terms of poverty reduction, access to drinking water, sanitation, health and education. Without sustainable and cooperative solutions for the management of shared resources, it will become ever more difficult, if not impossible, to ensure sustainable progress for the rapidly growing population. Transboundary cooperation is more crucial than ever in order to optimize the use of resources, ensure sustainability and prevent conflicts between riparian countries.

To stress the importance of water cooperation, the United Nations General Assembly has designated 2013 as the International Year of Water Cooperation. The resolution, which was elaborated at

the initiative of Tajikistan and co-sponsored by several of the countries present here, emphasizes that water is critical for sustainable development, including environmental integrity and the eradication of poverty and hunger, that it is indispensable for human health and well-being, and that it is central to achieving the Millennium Development Goals.

Compared with other regions in the world, the UNECE region is the most advanced in terms of cooperation on transboundary waters, even if the level and effectiveness of cooperation varies across the region.

Central Asia provides a good illustration of how water is at the crossroads of economic and social development. Finding an equitable and sustainable agreement supported by all Central Asian countries on the management of shared water resources is a prerequisite for growth and stability in the region. And it is becoming clear that such a solution needs to include the neighbouring countries, in particular Afghanistan.

From the point of view of international water law, there are two key instruments of reference: the 1997 United Nations Convention on the Non-Navigational Uses of International Watercourses, which is not in force but is in any case part of international customary law, and the Convention for which we are gathered here, namely the 1992 United Nations Economic Commission for

Europe Convention on the Protection and Use of Transboundary Watercourses and International Lakes (also known as the UNECE Water Convention). We already heard the Chair highlight the impressive history of the Convention. These two instruments are based on the same principles and they complement each other.

Since its entry into force in 1996, the UNECE Water Convention has provided an important framework for cooperation on transboundary waters. The Convention has been a driver for continuous progress in very different situations, including in the context of economic challenges and political tension.

Drawing on their direct implementation experience, Parties to the UNECE Water Convention recognized in 2003 that the Convention can provide a framework for improving transboundary cooperation beyond the UNECE region. As was mentioned earlier by the Chair, upon a proposal by Switzerland, Parties have amended the Convention to open it beyond the region. Once entered into force, such an amendment will allow any United Nations Member State to accede to the Convention. In adopting the amendment, Parties stressed its particular importance for neighbouring non-UNECE countries that share waters with UNECE countries, and called for an increased exchange and cooperation, even before the formal entry into force of the amendment. Expanding its reach will also increase its depth, by facilitating more comprehensive cooperation on these

critical issues. This conference is an important step in this process.

From a broader United Nations perspective, the opening of the UNECE Water Convention is a development to be praised and sustained. It testifies to the spirit of cooperation of the Water Convention and is in line with the aspirations and principles of the United Nations Charter. It also shows, at a more general level, the global reach and importance of the work of the UNECE.

For these reasons, Secretary-General General Ban Ki-moon has stressed that the UNECE Water Convention deserves support and should soon become open to countries outside the UNECE region. I trust that this conference will contribute to preparing for this opening, to speeding up the ratification process of the amendment and to demonstrating to non-UNECE countries the benefits they can draw from the Convention.

Water is one of our most precious resources, whether internally or shared. The topics at this conference fully complement the focus of the upcoming Rio+20 conference on sustainable development which will be held in June 2012, and I hope that the debates today and tomorrow can feed into that process also. Sustainable cooperation must be the basis for these discussions.

In that spirit, I wish you very fruitful and open discussions over the coming two days, and I extend the best wishes of Director-General Tokayev.

Thank you for your attention.