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

**at the opening of the
7th “Environment for Europe”
Ministerial Conference**

(Astana, 21-23 September 2011)

Mr. Chairperson,
Distinguished Participants,
Ladies and Gentlemen,

I am honored to speak to you today at this Seventh "Environment for Europe" Ministerial Conference. Allow me to warmly thank our host country Kazakhstan for the wonderful arrangements here in the beautiful city of Astana. I consider the high number of Ministers and other high-level delegates, and the presence of civil society representatives as a strong sign of collective commitment to further improve the state of the environment throughout the UNECE region. It is also thanks to the active participation of all major international organizations and institutions active in the region that this Conference is so remarkably encompassing.

[Looking back at 20 years of Pan-European cooperation.....]

Twenty years ago the first "Environment for Europe" (EfE) Conference at Dobříš Castle marked a new departure in regional environmental cooperation, with new goals: helping the countries in transition from a centrally planned to a market economy attain higher levels of environmental protection, and at the same time working towards the convergence of environmental policies throughout the region.

The six ministerial conferences held since 1991 have resulted in significant achievements:

The four assessment reports published by the European Environment Agency helped to identify major threats and challenges for the development of regional environmental policies.

The Environmental Action Programme Task Force has played an effective role in promoting environmental policy reform and capacity building in countries with economies in transition. The launching of the UNECE programme of environmental performance reviews made it possible to assess the effectiveness of the efforts of countries with economies in transition to manage the environment, and to offer the Governments concerned tailor-made recommendations.

The preparations for EfE ministerial conferences have stimulated the drawing up of a number of legally binding instruments such as the Aarhus Convention.

Other important policy tools have resulted from the EfE conferences, including strategies, programmes and guidelines. These tools, together with the links established between the EfE process and other ministerial processes in the region- environment and health; transport, health and environment; and the protection of forests – help to promote the integration of environmental considerations into sectoral policies.

The success of the EfE process has been demonstrated also in involving civil society organizations in regional environmental policy-making and implementation. Positive examples are a structured dialogue with a broad coalition of non-governmental organizations and the establishment of four regional environmental centres.

[Addressing main challenges for the region.....]

While considerable progress has been achieved, complex regional and global challenges remain. Let me focus on the two which you have chosen to address at this Conference:

[Water issues]

The Second Assessment of Transboundary Rivers, Lakes and Groundwaters, prepared under the auspices of the UNECE Water Convention, demonstrates that significant progress in the protection of water resources has been achieved throughout the region. The quality of our waters has in many instances improved and water has been used more efficiently.

This shows that the efforts done are paying back: the progressive and ambitious legislation, the investments in the environment field, the economic instruments put in place are bearing fruit.

However, progress is uneven across the UNECE region. Our water resources are still under great stress as a result of poor management practices, pollution, overexploitation, unsustainable production and consumption patterns, inadequate investment in infrastructure and low efficiency in water use. Competition — and in some cases even conflicts — between different water uses, often in different riparian countries, is also a challenge. Climate change impacts are expected to further aggravate these problems.

Central Asia is probably the most striking example illustrating the above mentioned progress and outstanding challenges. The situation in Central Asia also shows how crucial water management is for economic and social development and how water lies at the cross-road of sectoral policies.

Moreover, as most of the water resources in the UNECE region are transboundary, the above problems can only be tackled through cooperation. Also in this area, challenges and shortcomings are still significant. This underlines the importance of UNECE Conventions as a comprehensive framework of complementary and mutually supportive tools to foster cooperation on effective and sustainable water management.

Political commitment is needed to ensure that results achieved are consolidated and further progress is achieved. This is even truer in times of economic crisis and budgetary restrictions where environment budgets are threatened to be further reduced. It is therefore commendable that many UNECE countries have responded positively to the Astana Water Action and have voluntarily committed to concrete actions.

I trust that the exchanges and discussions in the coming days will provide further arguments advocating for sustainable water management, in particular vis-à-vis other sectors, and good examples to build on.

[Greening the economy]

Greening the economy is another issue of critical importance. Our region is the largest emitter of greenhouse gases that cause global warming—indeed it currently accounts for around half of global greenhouse gas emissions – but it has also been a leader in efforts to achieve greater sustainability and resource efficiency.

In recent years, the efforts of many industries in the region to achieve greater sustainability and cost savings have shifted from end-of-pipe solutions to product life cycles and integrated environmental strategies and management systems. Efforts are increasingly under way to create closed-loop production systems and adopt new business models. Furthermore, many Governments in the region have been at the forefront of a shift to sustainable consumption and production patterns.

Transitioning to a green economy will be challenging but can also generate many new opportunities for growth in the pan-European context. It has the potential to create decent jobs in the key green sectors and can also produce important health benefits, while significantly reducing environmental risks and ecological scarcities.

In the energy sector, the key challenges will be to achieve a decarbonized energy sector, to eliminate inefficient fossil fuel subsidies, and to improve energy efficiency and energy security. Improving energy efficiency in transport and encouraging the switch to cleaner solutions is also a key policy priority. Greening the housing sector will imply much greater energy efficiency of buildings, while the switch to green, sustainable forms of agriculture are characterized by ecologically sound

farming practices, such as water efficiency, the widespread use of organic and natural soil nutrients, and integrated pest control.

You will be deliberating on the transition towards a greening economy and on forging a concrete path of action. Finding the right policy mixes in the most cost-effective way, improving resource efficiency, and encouraging investment in the green economy to fully embrace the private sector are all very important issues that will shape the path ahead. There is no one-size-fits-all solution. Our region is highly diverse, encompassing developed and developing countries that require different policies and approaches. As a result, specific country situations, priorities and needs will have to be taken carefully into account in a transition to a green economy.

UNECE stands ready to help its members in moving towards greening the economy. Our activities in the fields of environment, sustainable energy, transport, housing and education for sustainable development provide important platforms and tools for identifying effective pathways to this end. UNECE can also make a pertinent contribution to efforts aimed at developing a stronger transformative global drive for the green economy.

As many countries of the region have already started to implement “greening” policies and measures in a number of key economic sectors, our Conference may consider developing, in time for the United Nations Conference on Sustainable Development Rio+20, a toolbox of best practices that could be shared within the region and with other regions. Our Conference may also discuss opportunities for developing a road map for greening the economy in the region.

By agreeing on steps to be taken within the region to transition towards a green economy, our Conference would provide an important contribution to putting the global economy on a more sustainable path. It would also convey the important message to the Rio+20 process that our region is willing to take the lead in the required transition process.

The Green Bridge Partnership Programme proposed by Kazakhstan is a valuable initiative to promote inter-regional cooperation as a joint effort of states, international organizations, public and business sectors from Europe, Asia and the Pacific for the transition to a green economy.

[Knowledge-based assessments]

Choosing the most cost-effective and efficient actions to promote sustainable water management and the green economy requires a great deal of information and analysis. The “Europe’s Environment — An Assessment of Assessments” report, which the European Environment Agency prepared for our Conference, recommends ways of how environmental observations and assessments can be strengthened and how environmental information and policy making can be more closely aligned. Based on the findings of this report our Conference is expected to decide to establish a regular process of environmental assessment and to develop the Shared Environment Information System (SEIS) across the region. UNECE, through its environmental monitoring and assessment programme, is prepared to contribute to achieving these goals.

Better knowledge of our environment, cause-effect relationships and of the effectiveness of environmental protection measures will help improving education and training for sustainable development. Knowledge-based environmental information will provide individuals with clearer understanding of their role in protecting our waters and related ecosystems, in building the green economy, as well as in consuming, producing and acting sustainably.

[Way forward]

I am confident that the results of our Conference will further strengthen pan-European cooperation on the environment for the benefit of all people in the region.

I look forward to productive deliberations over these 2,5 days. UNECE stands ready to assist with implementing the outcomes of this Conference.
