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**Remarks by Achim Steiner, UN Under-Secretary General and Executive Director,
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"Environment for Europe" Ministerial Conference

Astana, 21 September 2011--Thank you for inviting me to address the 7th Ministerial Conference of the Environment for Europe with 56 participating countries, the UN Economic Commission for Europe and partner organizations and institutions.

And thank you to the Government of Kazakhstan for hosting this important event.

Twenty years ago, in June 1991, the first Environment for Europe Ministerial Conference took place at the Dobris Castle near Prague where late Josef Vavrousek, Environment Minister of what was then Czechoslovakia initiated the "Environment for Europe" process.

Your meeting comes at a time of extraordinary reflection, debate and discourse on sustainable development in terms of acceleration and scaling-up.

20 years after the 1992 Earth Summit, the world is again on the Road to Rio with the Rio+20 conference scheduled for June next year.

As in Europe, the world has passed through two decades of extraordinary transformation and change geopolitically but also economically, socially and environmentally.

The Astana conference, the last pan European ministerial meeting before the November 1 deadline for inputs to Rio+20, can shape and sharpen this region's contribution to the overall themes.

Your two themes - *Sustainable management of water and water-related ecosystems*; and *Greening the economy: mainstreaming the environment into economic development* – reflect the urgency to take sustainability seriously in a world where next month the seventh billion person will be born—two billion more than in 1992.

Your two conference themes also echo to those of Rio+20--a Green Economy in the context of sustainable development and poverty eradication and an institutional framework for sustainable development.

Water is at the centre of the sustainable development debate precisely because of it is at the nexus of agricultural and food production as well as being vital for industrial processes and ecological sustainability, from river systems to forests.

It has been said that many have lived without love—none without water.

The new report of the European Environmental Agency prepared for the Astana Conference underlines that some 120 million people in the pan-European region (in particular in rural and remote areas in Eastern Europe, the Caucasus and Central Asia) still do not have access to safe drinking water or adequate sanitation, making them more vulnerable to serious water-related diseases.

Water scarcity in some countries of the region is also a political and security-related concern, as highlighted, for example, in our report on the Amu Darya River Basin produced in the framework of the Environment and Security Initiative.

Transboundary cooperation on water management can also assist to reduce political and economic tensions, as is demonstrated in the case of the Caspian Sea management under the Tehran Convention, which UNEP also helps to facilitate.

But there are many shared rivers systems where no such cooperative agreements are in place or are outdated.

Honourable ministers,

Many of these realities we face today have been emerging for decades, and yet somehow the pace and scale of the regional and international responses have fallen far short of what is required.

It is the same across issues of energy, or more precisely sustainable energy or patterns of mobility and urban development.

Indeed wherever one looks, with some notable exceptions, the economic pathways and development models we have inherited from a previous century are failing on the delivery of transformational social and environmental outcomes.

In response to the challenges of the here and now and the intergenerational ones looming, UNEP convened economists, specialists and experts as part of its Green Economy initiative.

Towards a Green Economy suggest investing two per cent of global GDP into ten key sectors can kick-start a transition towards a low carbon, resource efficient Green Economy.

The sum, currently amounting to an average of around \$1.3 trillion a year and backed by forward-looking national and international policies, would grow the global economy at around the same rate if not higher than those forecast, under current economic models.

But without rising risks, shocks, scarcities and crises increasingly inherent in the existing, resource-depleting, high carbon 'brown' economy, says the study.

As such, it comprehensively challenges the myth of a tradeoff between environmental investments and economic growth and instead points to a current "gross misallocation of capital".

The report sees a Green Economy as not only relevant to more developed economies but as a key catalyst for growth and poverty eradication in developing ones too, where in some cases close to 90 per cent of the GDP of the poor is linked to nature or natural capital such as forests and freshwaters.

It cites India, where over 80 per cent of the \$8 billion National Rural Employment Guarantee Act, which underwrites at least 100 days of paid work for rural households, invests in water conservation, irrigation and land development.

- This has generated three billion working days-worth of employment benefiting close to 60 million households.

Two per cent of the combined GDP of Cambodia, Indonesia, the Philippines and Vietnam is currently lost as a result of water-borne diseases due to inadequate sanitation.

- Policies that re-direct over a tenth of a per cent of global GDP per year can assist in not only addressing the sanitation challenge but conserve freshwater by reducing water demand by a fifth by 2050 compared to projected trends

With no improvement in efficiency of water use, water demand is expected to outstrip supply by as much as 40 per cent by 2030 worldwide.

By some estimates that improvements in water productivity, as well as increases in supply from for example desalination plants as well as more recycling of grey water can narrow this gap by about 40 per cent.

But the remaining 60 per cent will have to come from infrastructure investment, water policy reform and the development and deployment of new technologies, especially in agriculture sector which uses 70% of freshwater globally.

However, estimates suggest that putting agriculture to a green economy path could reduce freshwater use by 35 per cent and while transforming it from being a major emitter of greenhouse gasses to one that is net neutral and possibly even a carbon sink.

Honourable ministers, next week in Indonesia UNEP will hold its Tunza children and youth conference—the early signal is that the main preoccupation of this contribution towards Rio+20 will be jobs.

There has sometimes been the belief that being environmentally-focused is a job killer rather than a job grower.

The *Towards a Green Economy* report also challenges this stance and makes the case that over time the number of "new and decent jobs created" in sectors - ranging from renewable energies to more sustainable agriculture - will offset those lost from the former "brown economy".

For example, investing about one and a quarter per cent of global GDP each year in energy efficiency and renewable energies could cut global primary energy demand by nine per cent in 2020 and close to 40 per cent by 2050, it says.

Employment levels in the energy sector would be one-fifth higher than under a business as usual scenario as renewable energies take close to 30 per cent of the share of primary global energy demand by mid-century.

Savings on capital and fuel costs in power generation would under a Green Economy scenario, be on average \$760 billion a year between 2010 and 2050.

What is important to highlight to you today is that many countries and sub-national governments in the developed and developing world are already actively promoting a transition to a green economy.

The European Union published its Low-Carbon Economy Roadmap in March this year, highlighting that additional investment of Euro 270bn will be required annually over the next 40 years to move toward a low-carbon green economy in line with emission reduction targets .

The Roadmap notes in particular that renewable energy has a strong track record in job creation. According to the European Commission, in just 5 years, the renewable industry increased its work force from 230 000 to 550 000.

And the President of Russia Dmitrij Medvedev recently stated that “the environment and the economy do not contradict each other: a properly functioning economy is an environmentally friendly economy.”

Meanwhile, together with the UN ECE and other Inter-Governmental agencies UNEP is supporting countries' and sub-regions' integration of the green economy into development planning and we look forward to further expanding this collaboration with other partners.

Indeed as the the “*Information Paper on Success Stories on Green Economy from the UNECE Region*” underlines, there are many green economy activities going on in the UNECE region.

Besides engaging in specific preliminary projects on how to tailor a green economy to national circumstances in countries including Azerbaijan, Armenia, Moldova, Montenegro, Ukraine, and Tajikistan, UNEP is also supporting awareness raising and capacity building for example in respect of the South Eastern European platform.

And we will continue compiling case studies on green economy success stories as a way of knowledge building and knowledge sharing.

Let me wish you every success with your conference in Astana.

We are entering an era of rising risks from fuel and food crises, from increasing freshwater scarcities and challenges such as climate change that will test the resilience of our economies, countries and communities as perhaps never before.

But we also have a collective body of inspiring experiences, analysis, technological and scientific know-how, smart public policies and creative market instruments that can allow the world to move forward on a far more intelligent, fair and ultimately sustainable path—if we want to take it.

Thank you!