

**Statement of the Executive Secretary of the  
United Nations Economic Commission for Europe**

**Mr. Marek Belka**

at the Opening of the Sixth Ministerial Conference "Environment for Europe",  
Belgrade, 10 October 2007

Mr. Chairman. Excellencies, Distinguished Delegates.

I am honored to speak to you today at this Sixth Ministerial Conference "Environment for Europe". And allow me, at the outset, to warmly thank our host country Serbia for the wonderful arrangements here in the beautiful city of Belgrade, and for the good cooperation throughout the preparatory process. 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 improve the state of the environment throughout the UNECE region. It is also thanks to the active participation of all major regional organizations that this Conference is so remarkably encompassing. I am particularly pleased to welcome the Executive Director of UNEP, Mr. Steiner. UNEP is our sister organization within the UN for all environmental matters and we share a strong willingness to go further in our cooperation, making maximum use of our respective and complementary strengths.

This is the first "Environment for Europe" Conference that I have attended, but I have followed its preparations very closely. I also have learned about the earlier Conferences and know that the United Nations Economic Commission for Europe has been closely associated with this process since its early days back in 1991.

***Coherence***

Europe should be proud of the 'Environment for Europe' process. In today's world, particularly in the United Nations, much is said about the need to achieve COHERENCE. The "Environment for Europe" process has exemplified this concept and has done so since the first 'Environment for Europe' Conference sixteen years ago; it is the only multilateral framework in the region that brings together at a high political level the UNECE member States, the organizations of the United Nations system represented in the region, other intergovernmental organizations, regional environment centres, non-governmental organizations, and other major groups, in order to strengthen cooperation to protect and improve the environment, and to develop and implement long-term strategies toward the environment. It thus provides a region-wide platform for strengthening partnerships among all these actors as well as for ensuring consistency among the various mechanisms and instruments existing in the region to address specific environmental issues.

That is no small accomplishment.

***A glimpse to the past...***

I do not want to dwell on the past. But I think it is worth noting that sixteen years ago, the first Conference in Dobruška, in the then Czechoslovakia, laid down guidelines that included the introduction of ecological aspects in the process of transition of economies in central and eastern Europe. In other words, the Conference recognized the need to

help the countries in transition from a centrally planned to a market economy attain the level of environmental protection established in developed market economies, and, at the same time, to work to raise these standards throughout the region.

These ideas may seem obvious in today's world, but this was not so sixteen years ago. As someone from a transition economy, I can attest to the efforts it took to include environmental aspects into the overall economic planning. This remains, in many countries, a challenge today.

Much has happened since 1991.

The political and economic landscape of the UNECE region has changed significantly and many Central and Eastern European countries have now joined the European Union. In addition, current Community policies and initiatives provide new opportunities for closer cooperation between the EU and the countries of South-Eastern Europe and of Eastern Europe, Caucasus and Central Asia.

At the same time, economic developments and environmental performance have varied greatly within subregions: a number of countries face problems of poverty, the transition towards market institutions is still unfinished, there are considerable differences in the degree of competitiveness, and environmental conditions are quite disparate.

### ***And then to the future...***

How the "Environment for Europe" process can help reduce these disparities is something that should remain foremost in our minds during the next two and half days. During this time, you will take stock of progress made since the last Ministerial Conference in Kiev and look at the main environmental challenges that we are facing in the region, and determine what this process can contribute to achieving further progress in the implementation of environmental policies.

What are these challenges?

The Fourth Assessment Report on the State of the Environment prepared by the European Environment Agency in cooperation with UNECE and others partners clearly shows that we are not short of challenges. The list of areas to be addressed is long: environment - related health concerns caused by poor air quality; inadequate water supply and drinking water quality; soil degradation; risks posed by hazardous chemicals; adverse impacts of climate change; continuing biodiversity loss; overuse of marine resources; and the current unsustainable patterns of production and consumption.

Another building block of our improved knowledge on the status of our natural resources is the *First Assessment of Transboundary Rivers, Lakes and Groundwaters*, prepared under the UNECE Water Convention. Transboundary waters play a significant role in our region: 53 out of 56 countries share water resources with one or more other countries. This first Assessment highlights achievements in reducing transboundary impact. However, despite the hard work, old problems still persist and new issues have to be tackled (risks of upstream-downstream conflicts linked to water sharing; overuse of groundwater resulting from increasing abstraction for agricultural purposes and drinking water supply; pollution from point sources such as municipal sewage treatment plants and old industrial installations in Eastern Europe, Caucasus and Central Asia and in

South-Eastern Europe; pollution from diffuse sources (for example, agriculture and urban areas) in Western and Central Europe; and the effects of climate change on the water resources).

While some countries are making progress because of sustained efforts over several years, others continue to face obstacles hindering the implementation of effective environmental policies. Insufficient financial and human resources, weak environment ministries, and the lack of infrastructure and technical capacity are a few examples.

A major policy goal of low-income countries is the improvement of their economic competitiveness in order to achieve sustained growth and raise the material well-being of their populations.

We will discuss this on Thursday under item 6 and I hope that the discussion will help to illustrate how environmental policy concerns can be integrated into national economic development strategies and how economic growth can be achieved without increasing environmental pressures. This requires, in particular, a gradual shift towards an economic development model which would save environmental resources on a sustainable basis and which would be accompanied by various forms of cooperation for sharing the transition costs.

This is a point that I feel very strongly about. Because, the temptation sometimes for transition countries is to "go for growth" at the expense of the environment. This is not a viable option. There are powerful arguments for transition or "catch-up" economies to build in environmental concerns into their development strategies because this will allow them to build a modern economy and society. It is a wise investment that will reap benefits. To neglect the environmental aspects will cost countries and societies much more in the long run. What I am advocating, and what is advocated in the background document on environmental policy and international competitiveness - challenges for low-income countries in the UNECE region - is that the costs of reversing environmental degradation later on are always larger than the costs of avoiding pollution in the first place. And, not all environmental degradation is reversible.

Thus, as the paper states, "It is important to compare the costs of implementing an environmental policy with the costs of policy inaction, to avoid that society would risk losing today as well as tomorrow".

I look forward to the discussion on this very important issue.

This is not the only issue of great importance that you will discuss - I am very pleased that for the first time in this process, we will have a joint session of environment and education ministers to address the achievements and challenges in the implementation of the UNECE Strategy for Education for Sustainable Development. I believe that education is key to promoting sustainable development and the presence of so many education ministers here at the Conference is heartening, as it is a clear demonstration that Governments are also of the view that education is key if we are to embrace policies that promote sustainable development. It also demonstrates that cross-sectoral cooperation can work in practice.

At this Conference, there will not be any new legal instruments for adoption. Rather, this is a Conference for strengthening implementation of earlier commitments and deciding on those to be made here in Belgrade.

It is good to speak about implementation and commitments. But to ensure that implementation happens, we need to address the future of the "Environment for Europe" process. How can it be tailored to the specific needs of subregions, groups of countries and individual countries? Do we need a stronger focus on subregional initiatives and partnerships? How can it help countries implement the decisions that are taken at the Ministerial Conferences? I expect that our meeting will provide broad directions to address these issues and will set in motion a process that would lead to revisiting the format of the Environment for Europe with a view to making it more needs-driven and result-oriented.

### **CONCLUSION**

In concluding, I would like to stress one other point. The "Environment for Europe" Conference is not just a two-day Conference - it is a PROCESS, a process that, as I mentioned above, can be adjusted to better meet the needs of countries in changing circumstances. That flexibility has served it well over the years. And, this Process is strong because of its continuity which is assured by monitoring specific follow-up actions decided upon at the Conference. This has been done in the past and will, I understand, be done with respect to this Conference also. In other words, the results of this Conference have the potential to make a difference!

This process is also strong because it symbolizes "partnerships at work". Different partners sometimes have different objectives and perspectives. But as you take up the very important items on this agenda, I urge all partners in this process to join forces with renewed vigor - Governments, international organizations, NGOs and business - so that we will be able to make progress and build bridges to an environmentally sustainable future of all parts of the UNECE region. This is in the interests of Europe, but even I would submit, in the interests of the world beyond. For my part, and as the head of the UNECE, I can assure you that the UNECE will continue to do its part to support and strengthen this process.

Thank you.