Statement by the Executive Secretary

Mr. Ahmed Djoghlaf

on the occasion of the

Fourth Meeting of the Parties to the UNECE Convention on Environmental Impact Assessment in a Transboundary Context (Bucharest, Romania, 19-21 May 2008)

Ladies and Gentlemen:

The world is facing unprecedented environmental challenges. Human activities continue to impact our environment leading to degraded soils, polluted inland waters and oceans, pollution of the air we breathe and modifications to the climate system. We have dramatically modified the habitats that sustain the plants and animals on which we depend for our livelihoods.

Governments and civil society are collaborating through the Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD) - and indeed also through a range of other multilateral environmental agreements such as yours - to reverse the tide of devastation that humanity has inflicted upon the natural world. The stakes are high; although some 40 per cent of the world economy is derived directly from biological diversity, humanity is pushing ecosystems, species and gene pools to extinction faster than at any time since the dinosaurs died out 65 million years ago. At present, natural habitats and ecosystems are being destroyed at a rate of over 100 million hectares every year. More than 31,000 plant and animal species are threatened with extinction; according to the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations, at least one breed of livestock dies out every month. Band-aids are not enough. Only fundamental and far-reaching solutions can ensure a biologically rich world for future generations. Like the Espoo Convention, the Convention on Biological Diversity is dedicated to assist countries in the achievement of truly sustainable development.

Adopted in 1992 under the auspices of the United Nations Environment Programme, the CBD is the first global treaty to provide a comprehensive framework that addresses all aspects of biodiversity - ecosystems, species, and genetic diversity. The primary framework for action under the Convention is the ecosystem approach which aims for a balance between the three objectives of the Convention to conserve, sustainably use and equitably share biodiversity and to reconcile the need for environmental conservation with concern for economic development. By promoting sustainable development, the Convention does not seek to prohibit the use of natural resources, but rather seeks to ensure that the Earth’s renewable resources are not consumed so intensively that they cannot replenish themselves.

A key aspect of conserving biodiversity is recognizing that ecosystems do not adhere to human-drawn international borders. Thus, it is appropriate to establish transboundary corridors and conservation areas for migratory species and those with wide ranges to protect species as they move across countries. Examples of such corridors and areas can be found in South and Central America, central and southern Africa and Asia. While assessment of the impacts of these areas is generally premature, recent studies from southern Africa suggest that transboundary conservation can contribute to local human well-being through increased revenue from tourism. A key to ensuring these co-benefits is continued consideration of concerns of the local populations. Success of transboundary conservation can be fostered through institutions that are established to link legal processes with the scientific community, such as the Long Range Transboundary Air Pollutants regime, the Montreal Protocol, the Kyoto protocol, and indeed your Espoo Convention on Environmental Impact Assessment in a Transboundary Context.
In the context of the Convention on Biological Diversity, besides guidance on transboundary protected areas, the provision of liability and redress considers the need for restoration and compensation for damage to biodiversity beyond the national boundaries. A review of the need for a liability and redress regime under the Convention concluded that it would be premature to make a decision on the appropriateness of such a regime. Instead it was decided to gather and compile technical information relating to damage to biological diversity and approaches to valuation and restoration of damage to biological diversity, as well as information on national/domestic measures and experiences. A synthesis report has been prepared for examination by the ninth meeting of the Conference of the Parties to the CBD, which makes reference to the work under the Espoo Convention.

The issue of liability and redress for damage resulting from the transboundary movements of living modified organisms was considered as one of the one of the critical and urgent themes on the agenda during the negotiation of the Biosafety Protocol. Between May 2005 and March 2008 an Open-ended Ad Hoc Working Group of Legal and Technical Experts on Liability and Redress has met five times to (1) review of information relating to liability and redress for damage resulting from transboundary movements of living modified organisms, (2) analyse issues relating to the potential and/or actual damage scenarios of concerns, and application of international rules and procedures on liability and redress to the damage scenarios and (3) elaborate options for elements of rules and procedures on liability and redress, including definition and nature of damage, valuation of damage to biodiversity and to human health, threshold of damage, causation, channeling of liability, roles of Parties of import and export, standard of liability, mechanisms of financial security and right to bring claims. This process also draws on the experiences made in the Espoo Convention and its processes.

Other important areas of consideration for transboundary issues have been risk assessment in the context of biosafety and impact assessment for projects, programmes and policies. These have also been advanced under the CBD. In this context I wish to draw your attention particularly to the voluntary guidelines on biodiversity-inclusive impact assessments, which have been developed for application by the CBD, the Ramsar Convention on Wetlands and the Convention on the Conservation of Migratory Species of Wild Animals. These guidelines are designed to facilitate the consideration of biodiversity in Environmental Impact Assessments and Strategic Environmental Assessments and should be used along with other guidance and procedures on environmental assessment. They also complement guidelines on cultural, environmental and social impact assessments relevant to indigenous and local communities. The Strategic Environmental Assessment is considered to be a particularly important planning tool as is increasingly reflected by its use in the National Biodiversity Strategy and Action Plans of Parties to the CBD. In this context we have keenly observed the developments on your Protocol on Strategic Environmental Assessment and would like to encourage Parties to your Convention to join the Protocol so that it can come into force in the coming years.

If we are to reach the Johannesburg target of a significant reduction of the rate of biodiversity loss by 2010 and the Gothenburg target of halting biodiversity loss in Europe plans, programmes and policies must be carefully examined with regard to possible impacts on biodiversity and ecosystem services within and across political boundaries.

I wish you success in your deliberations and look forward to the continued interaction between our respective processes. In this regard I would like to invite you to celebrate with us the International Day for Biological Diversity on the theme of Biodiversity and Agriculture on 22 May. Only through enhanced cooperation and public awareness will we achieve the long-lasting change necessary to ensure the health of our planet, and our own well-being.