



**Third meeting of the Parties to the Convention on the Protection and Use of Transboundary Watercourses and International Lakes,  
Madrid, 26-28 November 2003**

## **Statement by Richard STADLER, Austria**

**Mr./Mrs. President, Ladies and Gentlemen,**

This Conference of the Parties to the Helsinki Convention takes place at a special time. First, it is at the end of the **United Nations Year on Freshwaters** underlining the importance of clean water and the need for action at all levels. Second, we are all preparing for the 12<sup>th</sup> session of the **Commission on sustainable development** where freshwater, sanitation and human settlements will be on the agenda.

This convention, and this meeting, provides a valuable input to the European preparations to the CSD scheduled in January in Geneva. The millenium goal as supplemented by the World Summit on Sustainable Development, to halve, by the year 2015, the proportion of people who are unable to reach or to afford safe drinking water and the proportion of people without access to basic sanitation is an overarching goal which will be looked into carefully. Austria believes that the Helsinki Convention can contribute to this goal as a basic instrument for international cooperation.

In the years since the second Conference of the Parties in 2000, the ECE Helsinki-Water Convention continued to prove to be an important contribution to fruitful cooperation of European states in all water-related matters. Austria appreciates the framework provided by the Helsinki Convention. By the work under the Helsinki Convention, know-how and cooperation culture is transmitted from West- and Central Europe to the Eastern edge of Europe and even beyond.

Austria gave support and welcomes the **Swiss proposal for opening access to this very successful Convention** to all members of the UN family with a focus on the states neighbouring the ECE-region.

The experience with events of severe extraordinary pollution in the Tisza-Danube basin gave the ultimate impetus for negotiations on a legal instrument for civil liability, which will certainly foster the application of the precautionary principle for industrial plants employing water-endangering substances that harm quality and organisms of waters in case they get released to the environment. The ECE-Convention offered the valuable basis for the successful negotiation.

Austria welcomes the successful **adoption of the Protocol on Civil Liability** and Compensation for Damage caused by the Transboundary Effects of Industrial Accidents on Transboundary Waters. It supports the initiative foreseen in the future work-programme to assist the Signatories in the interim-implementation of the Protocol.

Austria is currently preparing the signing of the Protocol.

All of you know that in December 2002 the **EU-Water Framework Directive** (WFD) was adopted. As a consequence the implementation of this new legislation has got absolute priority binding the capacity of the Austrian water-administration to a very large extent.

The dimension of the WFD, as you know, is twofold: namely, national and international. In the present context, the latter deserves more attention. In the three transboundary river basins of the rivers Rhine, Danube and Elbe, where Austria holds territorial rights, Austria is cooperating with a total of 23 states, comprising EU-member-states, states in accession and non-member-states. As to the Danube basin, also EU-non-member-states have expressed their will to participate in the process of implementation of the WFD principles, and the International Commission for the Protection of the Danube River is acting as a coordinating platform. A fascinating first achievement of the implementation-process will be the survey on the quality of water bodies across Europe being based predominantly on ecological criteria and assessed in an absolutely comparable way. Austria would like to encourage also those ECE-member-states that up till now have not been involved in this WFD-implementation process to join. Already on the occasion of the second Conference of the parties in Den Haag three years ago, Austria has expressed its appreciation for any initiative aiming at making non-EU-member-states of the ECE acquainted with the contents of the EU- Water Framework Directive. Austria likes to emphasise that this attitude has not changed and that the work for this aim under the umbrella of the Helsinki-Convention is highly appreciated.

However, we would like to recall that the activities under the Helsinki-Convention comprise nearly any water related working field one can think of. Austria would welcome a concentration of work on few areas of priority and thus to limit the number of working groups and pertaining meetings. An item of particular importance should be the **work in the field of prevention of accidental spills**.

Mr. Chairman, ladies and gentlemen,

let me close our remarks stating that Austria will support the idea of **establishing an own account or trust funds** in order to allow earmarked contributions of donors to be used for implementing specific goals of the Convention. However, the absolute priority of Austria's water administration in the forthcoming years lays in the efforts to implement the requirements of the Water Framework Directive.

Therefore, we have certain reservations against opening new working fields under the ECE-Water Convention. We certainly are not opposed to exploring the states' attitude towards creating a legally binding instrument in the area of **Flood Protection**. In our view, such a project would have the best chances of success, if the pertaining work and working results were to be coordinated with the ongoing developments at EU-level. If countries decide to start such a negotiation process, we would need a clear and precise mandate for any group to be established to carry out the negotiations.

**Mr./Mrs. chairman, ladies and gentleman, thank you for your attention**