

**Opening address by Ms Hedi Wegener, Member of the German Bundestag,
at the Conference "Water Unites – Strengthening Regional Cooperation on
Water Management in Central Asia"
Almaty, 17-18 November 2008**

Translation of advance text

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Excellencies,
Ladies and gentlemen,

On behalf of the German Government I bid you all a warm welcome to the conference "Water Unites – Strengthening Regional Cooperation on Water Management in Central Asia". May I take this opportunity also to thank the co-organizers of this conference, the United Nations Economic Commission for Europe and especially Paolo Garonna, the Commission's acting Executive Secretary, as well as the Executive Committee for the International Fund for the Saving of the Aral Sea and the United Nations Development Programme for all their hard work and good cooperation. I would like to pay a special tribute, too, to the Government of the Republic of Kazakhstan and notably Minister Umirzak Shukeev for making it possible for us to gather here today. You are all very welcome!

I'm delighted that you've made your way to Almaty today to actively pursue the process we launched together at the conference on 1 April 2008 in Berlin. It is a process that involves not only all Central Asian countries but also the many organizations and countries that have joined forces with us in this area and are keen to work for the common cause. So what better motto could we have for our conference than "Water Unites"? For that's what this conference is all about: uniting the efforts of the Central Asian countries, UN organizations such as UNECE and UNDP, the European Union, the international financial institutions, individual donor countries and NGOs. Uniting our efforts here today can and must make for greater efficiency and effectiveness across the board. As developments over recent months – including any number of extreme weather events – have shown, the decision to launch this process was the right one. Our aim is to offer an additional platform for discussing perhaps

not only those complex water issues that are acute right now but also those that need to be addressed and resolved in the medium and long term. We are particularly keen to help ensure greater interlinkage between policy issues on the one hand and concrete initiatives and projects on the other and to support joint efforts to resolve any problems that may arise. We're not seeking to impose anything on anyone; all we want to do is be a catalyst for problem-solving and advance the common cause.

Excellencies,

Ladies and gentlemen,

With the Central Asia water initiative launched at a conference in Berlin on 1 April by German Foreign Minister Frank-Walter Steinmeier, the Berlin process, as it is now called, saw the light of day. Let me briefly remind you of its main elements. Firstly, Germany is keen to promote transboundary water management in Central Asia. We believe this can best be done through concrete projects. I'll be telling you more about those this afternoon. Secondly, we want to strengthen the region's expertise and know how on sustainable water management by sharing our own expertise in this area. Here, too, a start has been made. Thirdly, we plan to introduce a new course on sustainable water management at the Kazakh-German University here in Almaty. We hope this will become a centre for students and young academics from the region to learn more about water issues and explore them in greater depth. That is clearly an investment in the region's future. Fourthly, we want to encourage networking among water experts from Germany, the EU and Central Asia. That applies just as much to experts from private-sector utilities as those from municipally-owned utilities and local politicians. This afternoon, as I said, I'll be going into these projects in more detail and taking stock of progress to date.

But there's one thing that shouldn't be forgotten. The Berlin Process is conceived as a long-term endeavour to promote regional cooperation. We see stability and cooperation not as ends in themselves but as the key to a prosperous future for the whole of Central Asia. That is also very clear to our partners in Central Asia. Such a future would be good not only for Central Asia but for its neighbouring regions and countries as well, including Afghanistan, for example. Equitable long-term solutions to water issues must be based on equal consideration for the interests of all countries concerned as well as on universally recognized principles and the relevant international conventions. That is the only way. But it will not come cheap. Especially at a time of global financial crisis, we must all take even greater care to ensure spending is directed to where it can achieve maximum effect.

Water shortages and the unequal distribution of this life-giving resource – a problem exacerbated in some regions by climate change – is for all of us a major challenge. In Central Asia we believe preventive approaches could in fact have much to offer. For the region is now an important link between a rapidly developing China, Russia, Europe and the growth regions of South Asia. Central Asia today has tremendous potential for development. That's the rationale of the EU's new Strategy for Central Asia, a bridge-building venture designed to bring benefits to both regions. But this bridge will function effectively over the long term only if its individual components are built on firm foundations. In addition to the political dialogue now evolving in a positive direction, these include cooperation in the area of internal and external security threats, economic development, education, energy and the environment. Water issues, I may point out, have implications for all these areas. Such issues are of great symbolic significance, of course, and they also have a key role to play in resolving problems in other areas. That was demonstrated very clearly, for example, at the recent EU-Central Asia Security Forum on 18 September in Paris. The European Union has realized how important these challenges are and is now developing concrete offers of cooperation. With our Berlin initiative we hope to support and accelerate these activities.

The fact that so many of you are gathered here today, including representatives of all five Central Asian countries, makes us hopeful and confident, too, that we are on the right track. For the only way to successfully tackle the challenges ahead is to unite our efforts.

We see the Berlin Process not only as encouraging general debate on water management in order to identify the issues and analyze the problems. We also hope it will contribute in tangible and concrete ways to ensuring that Central Asia's limited water resources are fairly shared and sensibly managed. We need to set our sights on the future and jointly develop effective and sustainable regional cooperation mechanisms for the water sector. And today we hope to make real headway on exactly that.

Thank you very much.
