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CIS Heads of Government meeting

At the invitation of the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS), Mr. Marek Belka, UNECE Executive Secretary, participated in the Heads of Government meeting in Minsk on 23 May.

The CIS has decided to develop an economic strategy aimed at strengthening trade and economic relations between its 12 states participants and increasing the CIS countries' economic growth and competitiveness. The strategy will be finalized within the next five months and be presented at the CIS Summit meeting in Autumn 2008.

Because a number of the priorities of the draft Strategy (for example energy, transport, trade, competitiveness and innovation) correspond to priority sectors of UNECE, it was proposed that UNECE could make a meaningful contribution to the elaboration and finalization of the strategy, and subsequently to its implementation. UNECE was the only external body invited to the meeting.



Ambassador Sergei Aleinik, Permanent Representative of Belarus to the UN Office at Geneva and Marek Belka, UNECE Executive Secretary

Mr. Belka stressed the traditional role of UNECE as a forum for consideration and solution of practical issues of trans-European and Trans-Atlantic economic cooperation and integration, its strong networks of highly qualified experts and, of course, the fact that, as part of the United Nations, it offered a neutral forum.

He also emphasized that it made sense to ensure that economic cooperation within the CIS was built on the basis of international experience and that its normative basis was harmonized with international and European norms and standards, including those developed under UNECE and the European Union (many of whose directives are based on UNECE norms and standards) as well as the World Trade Organization and others. ❖

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Access to information, public participation and access to justice with respect to genetically modified organisms

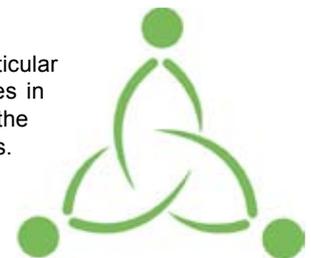
Can the public tell if a product contains genetically modified organisms? Who is entitled to participate in GMO decision-making? Is due account taken of the public's views? How do decision-makers reconcile competing interests? Can a member of the public challenge the legality of a GMO decision? If a GMO causes environmental harm, who if anyone would be entitled to seek redress?

These were just some of the questions discussed at a two-day meeting organized in Cologne at the initiative of the Parties to the Aarhus Convention¹ on 19-20 May.

The aim was to bring together experts to identify the most pressing needs and challenges regarding access to information, public participation and access to justice with respect to GMOs and to facilitate exchanges on good

practices to address them. The meeting had a particular focus on the needs and challenges facing countries in transition (especially those from Eastern Europe, the Caucasus and Central Asia) and developing countries. Participants included experts from interested governments (both Aarhus Convention Parties and those that are not Parties to the Convention), UN and regional organizations, NGOs, industry and academia.

The date and location of the meeting was chosen to coincide with CoP/MoP-4² of the Cartagena Protocol on Biosafety held in nearby Bonn the week before. A number of government, NGO and academic experts involved in the CoP/MoP-4 stayed on to take part in the Aarhus



¹ 1998 Convention on Access to Information, Public Participation in Decision-Making and Access to Justice in Environmental Matters
² Fourth meeting of the Conference of the Parties to the Convention on Biological Diversity serving as the Meeting of the Parties to the Cartagena Protocol on Biosafety.



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Convention event, including over a dozen experts from non-UNECE countries. The secretariat of the Cartagena Protocol also took an active role.

The meeting was designed to be as interactive as possible and to consider the issues from a variety of perspectives. As well as hearing presentations by prominent experts, participants had the opportunity to take part in interactive issues-based discussion groups. The last session of the meeting included a panel discussion on future challenges and priorities.

The Cartagena Protocol on Biosafety (particularly its article 23 on public awareness and participation) and the Aarhus Convention (including the 2001 Lucca Guidelines on GMO³ adopted under its auspices and the 2005 GMO amendment⁴ to the Convention), were key background documents during the meeting.

The Parties to the Aarhus Convention have formally recognized the need to cooperate with the Cartagena Protocol on Biosafety, with a view to maximizing synergies and avoiding duplication of effort. This includes encouraging the exchange of information and further collaboration between the secretariat of the Convention and that of the Cartagena Protocol. 38 out of the 41 Parties to the Convention are Party to the Cartagena Protocol. Participating experts welcomed UNECE's initiative in organizing the meeting and expressed a wish for further such collaboration in the future. ❖

³ At their first meeting (Lucca, Italy, October 2002), Parties to the Aarhus Convention adopted a set of guidelines on access to information, public participation and access to justice with respect to GMOs. The main objective of the Guidelines is to give guidance to the practical application of the provisions of the Aarhus Convention relevant to GMOs. However, it is also hoped that the Guidelines would assist other States seeking to develop or expand access to information, public participation and access to justice with respect to GMOs.

⁴ At their second meeting (Almaty, Kazakhstan, May 2005), Parties adopted an amendment to the Convention which requires each Party to provide for early and effective information and public participation prior to making decisions on whether to permit the deliberate release into the environment and placing on the market of GMOs. The amendment currently has 13 ratifications. It will enter into force once it has been ratified by 75% of the Parties.

For more information, see <http://www.unece.org/env/pp/gmo.htm> or contact Jeremy Wates or Fiona Marshall at public.participation@unece.org.

Facts and Figures

Natural gas plays an increasingly important role in the world's fuel and energy balance. It currently provides more than a fifth of global primary energy resources, and its share is expected to increase to as much as a quarter within the next few decades.

In the UNECE region, countries of Central Asia are important natural gas producers and exporters. They have about 5% of the world's proven reserves of natural gas. Moreover, their geographical location enables them to supply natural gas both to Europe and to Asia, where demand for energy has increased considerably in recent years.

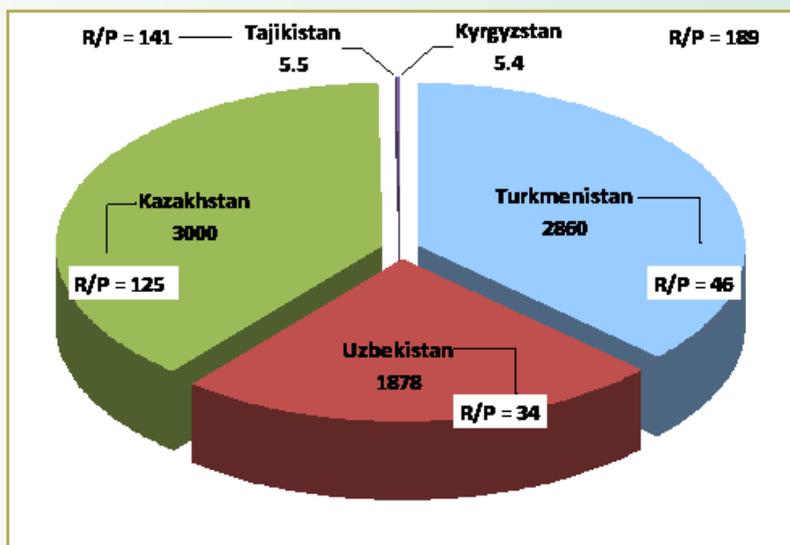
However, the distribution of natural gas reserves among these five Central Asian countries and the expected duration of these reserves at current production levels are very uneven.

Clearly, Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan have the bulk of proven reserves of the region. The natural gas production levels are highest in the first two countries whereas in Kazakhstan current production levels are much lower, particularly in relation to its reserves.

Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan have very small proven reserves of natural gas and other hydrocarbons; consequently their gas production capacities are very low. However, it is worth noting that both countries have ample sources of hydroelectric power and are important providers of electricity in the region. ❖

Potential of natural gas supplies from Central Asia

Total gas reserves and their ratio to gas production (R/P) in Central Asian countries, 2006 (reserves in billion cubic metres)



Sources: For Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan based on British Petroleum, BP Statistical Review of World Energy, June 2007/ Natural Gas, and for Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan based on statistics of respective Ministry of Energy.

Note: Reserves-to-production (R/P) ratio is calculated by dividing the reserves remaining at the end of any year by the production in that year; the resulting figure refers to the length of time that those remaining reserves would last if production were to continue at that rate.