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Statement by

**Mr. Sven Alkalaj
United Nations Under-Secretary-General
Executive Secretary of the United Nations
Economic Commission for Europe**

at

**The Third Workshop on Adaptation to Climate Change in Transboundary Basins:
Making Adaptation Work**

**Geneva, 25 April 2012
10.00 a.m. room XII**

Mr. Chairperson,
Distinguished Participants,
Ladies and Gentlemen,

It is my great pleasure to welcome you here today to the third Workshop on adaptation to climate change in transboundary basins under the UNECE Convention on the Protection and Use of Transboundary Watercourses and International Lakes. Allow me to introduce myself, I am Sven Alkalaj, the new Executive Secretary of ECE since 10 April 2012.

As well as our participants from the ECE region, I am particularly happy to welcome the numerous participants from outside the UNECE region, namely from Afghanistan, Algeria, Bangladesh, Congo, Colombia, El Salvador, Egypt, Jordan, Mexico, Morocco, Myanmar, Nicaragua, Pakistan, Tunisia, etc. We look forward to hearing about your experiences during the workshop

- Evidence about a changing climate is overwhelming. To cite just a few facts: 2011 was the 11th warmest year since records began in 1850, despite the cooling influence of the La Niña.
- Precipitation extremes had major impacts around the world. Significant flooding occurred on all continents, whilst major droughts affected parts of east Africa and North America. The extent of Arctic sea ice cover fell to near record-low levels.

- 2011 has become widely recognized in the insurance industry as the costliest year in recent history with regard to natural disasters. Munich Re, a reinsurance company with broad experience in factoring climate change into risk modelling, assesses that 2011 generated more than \$380 billion in worldwide insured losses. The disasters have caused the global insurance industry to raise prices and Munich Re suggests that the pricing surge may be due to climate change.
- Transboundary waters are no exception: the expected impacts, such as increased frequency and intensity of floods and droughts, will heavily affect transboundary resources and consequently the economic sectors depending on them, such as energy, agriculture, navigation, as well as human health and well being. The fact that approximately 40 per cent of the world's population live in river and lake basins that cross the political boundaries of two or more countries and that over 90 per cent of the world's population live in the countries that share these basins underline the dimension and importance of the potential problems.
- Adaptation in transboundary basins is therefore an imperative.
- Cooperating to jointly assess impacts of climate change, share results and make sure that measures in neighbouring countries are mutually sustaining should be the norm. This is not the case at present.
- The Second Assessment of Transboundary Rivers, Lakes and Groundwaters published by UNECE in 2011 has shown that many countries are now starting to adapt to climate change at the national level. However, very little is done at the transboundary level.
- This brings the risk that countries unilaterally take adaptation measures that have unintended negative effects on their neighbours, with resulting impacts on economic and social development as well as security.

Therefore allow me to outline a few objectives where this workshop could provide guidance.

- The first objective of this workshop is to dispel these risks.
- Transboundary cooperation is not only key to preventing negative impacts of unilateral adaptation measures, it also enables the sharing of costs and benefits of measures, better managing uncertainty through exchange of information, and enlarging the range of measures available, thereby finding better and more cost-effective solutions

However, what should we do and how should we go about improving this situation?

- The UNECE Convention on the Protection and Use of Transboundary Watercourses and International Lakes (also known as Water Convention) is a unique framework for supporting transboundary cooperation in adapting to climate change.

- Focus on adaptation to climate change under the Convention dates back to 2007. As a first step, strategic material in the form of “Guidance on Water and Adaptation to Climate Change” was developed. But guidance alone is not enough, it needs to be implemented and the experiences gathered during implementation need to be shared.
- Therefore work under the Water Convention in the current programme of work for 2012-2015 concentrates on two main areas. First of all, it promotes adaptation on the ground through a programme of pilot projects in a number of transboundary basins in the UNECE region. Secondly it provides a platform for all actors to share experience on adaptation in transboundary basins, including lessons learned, and to make relevant recommendations. Today’s workshop is part of our efforts to promote such sharing of experience.
- The Water Convention was amended in 2003 to allow countries outside the UNECE region to accede to it. It is expected that the amendment will enter into force by the end of this year, turning the Convention into a global instrument. The wealth of experience and guidance accumulated under the Convention, including in the area of adaptation, will help foster transboundary water management at the global level.
- The activities on water and climate, with their global participation already now, as illustrated by this workshop where many participants come from outside the UNECE region, show the advantages and potential of a global intergovernmental framework for learning from each other on transboundary water issues. I very much look forward to the first ratification of the Convention by a non-ECE country.
- Another important objective of this workshop - and of the meeting of the Task Force on Water and Climate that will follow - is to provide inputs to the discussion on the future activities in the area of water and climate under the Convention, which will be decided upon by the Meeting of the Parties at its sixth session in November this year.
- Preliminary ideas on future work include the continuation and possibly the expansion of the programme of pilot projects and of the platform for exchanging experiences. We are looking forward to seeing other basins, including from other regions, join our programme of pilots.
- The complexity of the problems to be addressed, in particular at the global level, will require the joining of forces and the establishment of strong partnerships – as we have been able to build in the past.
- I would like to thank the representatives of the many partner organizations who are here today. It is crucial to maintain and strengthen our cooperation so as to mutually reinforce our activities. UNECE is ready and eager to continue working closely with all of you.
- None of the results achieved so far would have been possible without leadership. I would like to thank The Netherlands and Germany for leading the climate change activities under the Convention, as well as Finland and Switzerland for their generous financial support.

- Finally, I would like to thank the partners in this workshop, the Alliance for Global Water Adaptation, the European Commission, the Global Water Partnership Mediterranean, the World Meteorological Organization and the Global Environmental Facility.
- I wish you all a very stimulating and productive two-day workshop and Task Force meeting.

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