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Opening Statement

by

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at

**the meeting "Review of Work in the SPECA Framework in Support of
Implementation of the Decisions of the Fifth Regional Economic
Cooperation Conference on Afghanistan"**

Bangkok, 26 November 2012

Mr. Chairperson, Excellences, Ladies and Gentlemen,

I am pleased to welcome Dr. Zalmay Rassoul, Foreign Minister of the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan, Mr. Jan Kubis, Special Representative of the Secretary-General for Afghanistan, Mr. Miroslav Jenca, Head of the UN Regional Centre for Preventive Diplomacy in Central Asia, and other high-level participants. I hope this meeting will not only reconfirm the commitment of SPECA to the stabilization of Afghanistan through strengthened regional economic cooperation but, more importantly, help to translate this commitment into practical and effective action, including through increased donor support for project implementation.

The Government of Afghanistan, as well as partner Governments, international organizations and donors have for many years recognized the importance of regional economic cooperation for the reconstruction and sustainable development of Afghanistan. Over the years, five Regional Economic Cooperation Conferences have discussed the practical steps needed to promote such cooperation. The Istanbul Process on Regional Security and Cooperation for a Secure and Stable Afghanistan provided a strong impetus to this process and helped to develop a new agenda for regional cooperation.

The Governments of participating countries recognized the potential of SPECA to support regional economic cooperation between Afghanistan and other Central Asian countries at the 2010 Economic Forum held under the title “Strengthening Regional Cooperation in Central Asia: a Contribution to the Long-term Stability and Sustainable Development of Afghanistan”. Pursuant to the decision of the 2010 session of the SPECA Governing Council, several projects in support of closer economic cooperation between Afghanistan and other Central Asian countries were presented at the meeting of the Economic Forum entitled “Developing a Plan of Action to Strengthen the Stability and Sustainable Development of Afghanistan through Regional Economic Cooperation in Central Asia” in Ashgabat in June 2011.

Furthermore, SPECA was recognized by these high-level international meetings as an implementing framework for projects supporting regional economic cooperation with Afghanistan. At the Fourth Regional Economic Cooperation Conference on Afghanistan (RECCA) held in Istanbul in November 2010, the role of SPECA was highlighted. The UNECE also provided assistance in the preparation and conduct of the Fifth RECCA meeting held in Dushanbe in March 2012, the first ever in a Central Asian country. Through a UNECE Liaison Officer, UNECE experts supported the work of the Afghan-Tajik Task Force in charge of the meeting. The Dushanbe Declaration includes several projects to be implemented in the SPECA framework.

The Heart of Asia Ministerial Conference held in Kabul in June 2012 included SPECA as an implementation framework in four of the seven priority Confidence Building Measures identified by Ministers. The Ministerial Conference also urged all participants to use the existing regional frameworks more effectively to promote regional cooperation with Afghanistan.

Piecemeal projects are unlikely to achieve the sustainable involvement of Afghanistan in regional economic cooperation with other Central Asian countries. Coherent and comprehensive efforts are needed, preferably within a regional framework. SPECA is a regional arrangement which includes Afghanistan and the five other Central Asian countries among its members. It supports the involvement of Afghanistan not only in regional economic cooperation but also in the work of regional organizations such as the International Fund for Saving the Aral Sea. The Programme has accumulated a significant portfolio of successfully implemented projects. Over the years, the experts from UNECE and UNESCAP have developed an in-depth understanding of the advantages of regional economic cooperation as well as of the complex problems hindering its further progress in the region, a key prerequisite for effective project design and implementation. Project proposals in the SPECA framework are developed in close consultation with policy-makers and experts from SPECA countries. This is the only guarantee that they address real needs and offer pragmatic, realistic solutions.

Within the SPECA framework, Afghanistan is involved in and benefitting from the implementation of a number of projects. Let me just mention the Aid for Trade Road Map adopted by Ministers of Afghanistan and other SPECA countries in December 2010 in Bangkok. Other projects have been specifically designed to promote cooperation between Afghanistan and its Central Asian neighbours. For example, a UNECE project is supporting the joint watershed management of the upper Amu Darya river basin by Afghanistan and Tajikistan while a UNESCAP project facilitates the strengthening of economic ties between Afghanistan and neighbouring countries.

In my view, the comparative advantages of SPECA warrant a significant increase of project implementation within its framework. Let me mention three project proposals that are still in need of funding.

The joint UNECE-UNCTAD project on improved customs data exchange between Afghanistan, Uzbekistan, Tajikistan and Turkmenistan would bring immediate benefits by facilitating legitimate trade through effective operational customs transit corridors and the increased operational capacities of customs administrations to fight illegal trade and trafficking in the SPECA region.

The project on the provision of technical assistance to Afghanistan and its neighbours on the implementation of the TIR Convention and the accession of Afghanistan to the

International Convention on the Harmonization of Frontier Controls of Goods could be implemented through improved cooperation among interested chambers of commerce, as proposed both by the Fifth RECCA meeting and the Heart of Asia Ministerial Conference.

And finally, the project offering technical assistance for the development of an Afghan Rail Organization would facilitate the provision of improved rail services for the benefit of all the countries of Central Asia.

The well-established working contacts between UNECE and UNESCAP experts and their Afghan counterparts, including in the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the existing SPECA networks of policy-makers and experts in member countries and the increasingly active SPECA Regional Office in Almaty all contribute to effective project implementation. The available in-house expertise of the two Regional Commissions and the considerable expert pool supporting the implementation of UNECE conventions guarantee a high degree of professionalism and the efficient use of resources.

I sincerely hope that our discussions today will mobilize more support for project implementation in the SPECA framework, so it can match the political support expressed by high-level meetings and the Governments of SPECA countries.
