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**Opening Statement**

**by**

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**United Nations Under-Secretary-General**

**Executive Secretary of the United Nations Economic Commission for Europe**

**at**

**the 8<sup>th</sup> session of the SPECA Governing Council**

**Almaty, 22 November 2013**

Mr. Chairperson, Excellences, Ladies and Gentlemen,

This year we celebrate the 15<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Tashkent Declaration that established SPECA. On 26 March 1998 in Tashkent the Presidents of Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan and Uzbekistan, together with the Executive Secretaries of UNECE and ESCAP “declared their intention to adopt the UN Special Programme for the Economies of Central Asia and to begin its implementation”.

Turkmenistan, Azerbaijan and Afghanistan joined SPECA subsequently. The Tashkent Declaration recognizes the shared interest of Central Asian states in economic development and the need for further strengthening economic ties among them.

It took several years for SPECA to establish itself as an effective framework for supporting regional cooperation among Central Asian countries and their rapid integration into the world economy. In February 2004 Secretary-General Kofi Annan wrote to the Presidents of the six countries that were members of the Programme at that time: Azerbaijan, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan,

Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan. In his letter the Secretary-General reconfirmed the importance of SPECA and the United Nations' commitment to it. He also suggested that the Executive Secretaries of UNECE and ESCAP visit SPECA countries to discuss with their leaders how to strengthen the Programme.

Based on the outcomes of these visits the two Regional Commissions had elaborated a proposal for a comprehensive reform of the Programme that was discussed and adopted on 25-27 May 2005 in Astana at the International Conference on Strengthening Subregional Economic Cooperation in Central Asia and the Future Role of SPECA. In her opening statement the Executive Secretary of the UNECE thanked “the Governments of the SPECA member countries for their active support to the joint efforts of the two UN Regional Commissions to implement the initiative of the United Nations Secretary-General Mr. Kofi Annan on strengthening the UN Special Programme for the Economies of Central Asia.” She pointed out that “during recent consultations carried out in the capitals of the SPECA member countries we received clear indications of strong

support to subregional economic cooperation and collected a wealth of fresh ideas and concrete proposals.”

The SPECA reform adopted in 2005 paid special attention to strengthening the ownership of the Programme by its participating countries and put great emphasis on project implementation. Countries were invited to actively participate in the governance of SPECA, the number of project working groups increased from two to six and Economic Forums held back-to-back with the Governing Council meetings were introduced.

The reform has successfully reinvigorated SPECA. Since then Economic Forums have discussed a number of strategic issues of regional cooperation in Central Asia. Economic Forums in Baku, Almaty, Berlin, Moscow, Bishkek, Geneva, Ashgabat and Bangkok discussed a broad range of issues from developing trade and investment ties with Europe, Asia and the Russian Federation to the strengthening of stability and sustainable development in Afghanistan through regional economic cooperation.

Project implementation in the SPECA framework has increased severalfold since the reform was introduced. But this increase in activities could not keep pace with the growth of demand. At recent Governing Council meetings, Governments of SPECA participating countries kept urging the two Regional Commissions to provide more resources for project implementation. Since the UNECE and ESCAP themselves are not donors, extrabudgetary resources need to be raised through joint efforts of participating countries and the two Regional Commissions.

In response to demands by participating countries and based on their ideas and concrete suggestions, last year at the Bangkok session of the Governing Council, UNECE and UNESCAP presented a set of proposals on further strengthening SPECA. Since then, I visited several SPECA countries, in the case of Kazakhstan together with my colleague, Noeleen Heyzer, to discuss these proposals. I will report later this morning on the outcomes of these consultations. Overall the reactions of top-level decision-makers of these countries were positive and supportive, reconfirming the importance of the Programme.

Today's session of the Governing Council has a crowded agenda. I would like to invite you to engage in a forward-looking and substantive discussion, providing guidance and a new momentum to the broad range of activities in the SPECA framework.

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