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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 Side event on “How global legal frameworks can make a difference in  
practice”**

**Wednesday, 9 October, 1:15-1:55 p.m.  
Budapest Water Summit, BLF room**

Excellencies, ladies and gentlemen,

The opening plenary yesterday noted the importance of transboundary cooperation over shared waters. Without sustainable and cooperative solutions for the management of shared resources, it will become ever more difficult, if not impossible, to ensure progress for the world's rapidly growing population. In the face of climate change, transboundary cooperation is ever more crucial to optimize the use of resources, ensure sustainability and prevent conflicts between riparian countries.

In my speech yesterday I have also highlighted the unique developments in transboundary water cooperation that are currently happening, as we will soon have two global legal frameworks for such cooperation: the UNECE Water Convention, also known as the Helsinki Convention, and the UN or New York Watercourses Convention.

As stated by numerous international lawyers, and demonstrated by countries that have joined both Conventions, they are absolutely compatible and complementary. Each of them has its advantages. For this reason, the United Nations Secretary-General has not only encouraged countries to join both Conventions, but also to implement them in a synergistic way. To the Meeting of the Parties to the Helsinki Convention last year, the Secretary-General stated: “The globalization of the UNECE [Water] Convention should also go hand-in-hand with the expected entry into force of the [New York] Watercourses Convention. These two instruments are based on the same principles. They complement each other and should be implemented in a coherent manner.”

But what might the global architecture for transboundary cooperation look like when both agreements are in force? I am very happy that Parties to both Conventions themselves have

started a discussion on this issue, which is also included in the UNECE Water Convention's current programme of work.

The experience collected in the 20 years of implementation of the UNECE Water Convention, as well as the more than 20 guidance documents elaborated in intergovernmental processes, can be particularly valuable also for Parties to the New York Watercourses Convention. I would like to highlight two examples of soft law instruments: a guidance document on water and adaptation to climate change in transboundary basins, and recently-adopted model provisions on transboundary groundwaters.

Since the 1990s, the UNECE Water Convention has supported the development of transboundary agreements, the establishment of joint institutions and the strengthening of cooperation at both political and technical levels, in the pan-European region. This has happened in very diverse circumstances, including in the context of economic transition,

political tensions and conflict, for example, after the dissolution of Yugoslavia. To be specific, the Convention has contributed to or served as a model for the transboundary agreements on the Chu-Talas, Danube, Dniester, Drin, Rhine and Sava Rivers, as well as agreements on the transboundary waters shared by Belarus, Estonia, Kazakhstan, Mongolia, the Russian Federation and Ukraine, among others.

Looking in more detail, for the Drin River Basin in South-Eastern Europe, UNECE and the Global Water Partnership-Mediterranean are facilitating the Drin Dialogue, which was set up to look into the many competing interests and challenges facing riparians, and which led to the signing of the Memorandum of Understanding on a Shared Strategic Vision for the Sustainable Management of the Drin River Basin.

And the recent Treaty on the Dniester River Basin has demonstrated how the provisions of the two global Conventions can be used in developing a transboundary agreement in a

complex geopolitical setting, in a process facilitated by UNECE and partners.

The UNECE Water Convention has provided a permanent intergovernmental forum to discuss transboundary water cooperation, share experience and identify best practices in many areas. Moreover, over the past 20 years, the work under the Convention has evolved in response to the changing needs of Parties, as well as other countries, and addressing emerging issues. Three examples of such issues are ecosystem valuation, adaptation to climate change and the water-food-energy-ecosystems nexus.

As the New York Watercourses Convention does not have an institutional framework, the one provided by the UNECE Water Convention may be very valuable. This has been demonstrated by the high level of interest of countries from outside the UNECE region in our Convention, more than 40 of which have participated in its meetings and activities.

The United Nations Secretary-General in his statement on World Water Day 2013 therefore urged countries outside the UNECE region to join the UNECE Water Convention – the Helsinki Convention – and to further develop it. I very much look forward to the first such accession to the Convention and I see that several of those countries that have expressed interest in the Convention are here today.

But why is a coordinated development and implementation of the two Conventions so important? The majority of transboundary basins worldwide still do not have any mechanisms for their joint management in place and almost three quarters of all countries worldwide have not joined either Convention. For this reason, it is crucial to unite forces, and to work in a partnership where everyone – Parties, international organizations, the secretariat, NGOs and funding agencies – will have their place, to support countries in improving transboundary cooperation in a coherent and coordinated way.

The Meeting of the Parties to the UNECE Water Convention has had such a vision by deciding to implement all areas of work in cooperation with partners and by adopting decisions on cooperation with several major players, notably UNESCO and the Global Environment Facility, which I particularly thank.

In conclusion let us work together to ensure sustainable management of our basins for the benefit of all.

Thank you.

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