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The 15th OSCE Economic and Environmental Forum, Part 1

**Key Challenges to ensure environmental security and sustainable development in
the OSCE area: Land degradation, soil contamination and water management**

Opening Session

Vienna, Austria

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Excellencies, Distinguished Delegates, Ladies and Gentlemen,

It is a great pleasure to address you at the opening session of the first part of the 15th OSCE Economic and Environmental Forum.

At the outset, let me express my gratitude to the government of Spain and the OSCE Secretariat for their kind invitation. At the same time, I would like to extend the best wishes for 2007 to the Spanish delegation and to congratulate the government of Belgium for their challenging – but very successful – 2006 OSCE chairmanship.

Before I sketch out the UNECE perspective for Spain’s 2007 OSCE “environmental theme”, allow me to take a brief look back at 2006.

Last year was - in many respects - a benchmark year for the UNECE and OSCE co-operation.

As you know, “transport” was the theme of the OSCE Economic and Environmental Dimension last year. As the UNECE Secretariat hosts about 60 international legal instruments in the area of transport, it was natural for the Economic Commission for Europe to be actively involved in preparatory seminars, both parts of the Economic Forum as well as a number of other transport-related OSCE initiatives.

The UNECE contribution was constructive and meaningful. The Ministerial Decision on “Future Transport Dialogue in the OSCE” (adopted at the OSCE Ministerial Council meeting last month in Brussels) has confirmed not only the importance of transport to enhance regional and economic co-operation but also recognized the significant role that the UNECE plays in this area.

We, at the UNECE, wish to support the Ministerial Decision. Most major transport challenges in the UNECE region such as infrastructure and safety can be addressed, to a great extent, by the more effective implementation of the UNECE’s legal instruments on transport. In this regard, the UNECE welcomes the Ministerial Council’s Decision to encourage OSCE participating States to make better use of existing international legal instruments, standards and best practices.

Looking forward, the UNECE will be pleased to continue to offer its substantive expertise to achieve the objectives articulated in the Ministerial Decision on “Future Transport Dialogue in the OSCE”. In fact, the UNECE has already extensively supported preparations for the planned transportation conference in Tajikistan.

Overall, the joint UNECE and OSCE “transport achievements” in 2006 would not have been possible without the dynamic involvement of the Chair-in-Office. I would like to take this opportunity to thank all the Belgian government officials involved, in particular Ambassador Bertrand de Crombrughe, Frank Geerkens and Brigitte Waignein for making the 2006 “transport theme” a success.

As I have already noted, 2006 appears to have been a benchmark year for co-operation between the UNECE and the OSCE. The essential ingredients for successful co-operation have always been present but the goodwill on both sides, complemented by a mutual understanding of each other's institutional constraints served to further strengthen this regional partnership.

The OSCE/ECE partnership is a natural one: both organizations share virtually the same membership; both operate on a consensus principle; and they both provide a neutral framework for their constituents. And, their mandates are complementary.

The OSCE is mainly a political forum while the UNECE, in its sectoral areas, acts as an expert secretariat concentrating on the development and negotiation of international norms and standards that help to integrate the economies of Europe. The two dimensions, economic and political, go together.

The links between security and economic development need to be emphasized and, at the upcoming 60th Anniversary Session of the ECE, in April, we will have a panel that focuses on co-operation for stability and prosperity that will address such links. And, I very much hope that OSCE will participate in this important debate.

Today's meeting may mark the beginning of enhancing yet another area of mutual interest. There are five major international environmental conventions under the UNECE's roof. They are everybody's to be acceded to and effectively implemented. We have extensive experience in preparing and managing environmental legal instruments. The UNECE stands ready to assist.

The United Nations can do many things right, but it can rarely do them well alone. As a result, the international community – including the UNECE – has not always been successful. Let me highlight two examples related to land degradation and land contamination.

First, the terrible tragedy of Chernobyl left not only dead people and ruined lives, but also millions of hectares of forest and agricultural land that cannot be used. The ecosystems in three countries absorbed the radioactive elements, preventing them from doing further harm but created a time bomb linked to the risk of radioactive dissemination by forest fires.

National experts, with the help of ECE and other agencies, drew up a viable plan for making the best of a bad situation. Regrettably, funding was not found as national authorities focused only on the spectacular danger of the destroyed reactor.

Second, poor governance and ineffective institutions also threaten managed and natural ecosystems. Illegal logging, whether by criminal enterprises or by the rural poor desperate for fuel and building materials, destroys forests and contributes to flooding. A ministerial declaration signed in St. Petersburg in December 2005, urged

all governments faced with this problem to prepare national strategies to fight illegal logging.

The international community – including the UNECE - continues to stand ready to advise and help. However, the affected countries must rise to the challenge and muster the political will to take the necessary measures.

There have also been considerable accomplishments in the area of land and water management and good governance.

As one of the five UNECE environmental conventions, the Water Convention has supported the development of transboundary waters co-operation for over ten years now. Presently, the UNECE is assessing the implementation of the Water Convention. The assessment – when completed this year for the sixth Ministerial Conference “Environment for Europe - will lay a solid foundation for future actions and policies.

There is a strong link between water and land management as flooding is an important cause of land degradation. The UNECE has developed Guidelines on Sustainable Flood Prevention and the ongoing work is taking into account the effects of climate change. The overall aim of this work is to develop a Pan-European Strategy on Water and Climate Adaptation to be presented in 2009.

Environmental threats such as land degradation, competing demands on natural resources and transboundary pollution may strain neighbourly relations. In this context, the UNECE has collaborated with the OSCE on a number of successful initiatives. The establishment of a bilateral Commission on the Chu and Talas rivers (in Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan) and the Dniester river project (involving the Republic of Moldova and Ukraine) are prime examples.

The UNECE also highly values collaboration within the Environment and Security Initiative (ENVSEC). This initiative is not only about environmental co-operation as a tool for preventing conflicts, but also about pragmatic and efficient sharing of responsibilities to achieve common objectives.

Co-operation with a variety of partners within a broad political framework as well as access to a different set of donors are valuable components of the ENVSEC Initiative. We hope to continue and further develop this collaboration.

A few days ago, at the Permanent Council of the OSCE, the new Chairman-in-Office, Foreign Minister Mr. Miguel Angel Moratinos laid out his country’s objectives for

2007. One of them was to give priority to activities aimed at promoting greater participation in pluralistic societies.

I am pleased to see this issue on the OSCE agenda for 2007. The UNECE “Aarhus Convention” (so known because its full title: the UNECE Convention on Access to Information, Public Participation in Decision-making and Access to Justice in Environmental Matters is very long) aims at fostering greater participation in pluralistic societies thereby contributing to environmental security.

Effective environmental governance is crucial to resolving problems of water management, land degradation and soil contamination. An important aspect of better governance is the creation of more transparent and accountable institutions. That is what the “Aarhus Convention” provides for.

As you will hear later on today, the UNECE “Aarhus Convention” not only provides for greater transparency, but it also gives the public the right to participate in decision-making processes. Such transparency and participation has clear benefits. It improves the quality of the resulting projects while simultaneously strengthening public support.

I welcome OSCE’s strong commitment to promoting the implementation of the “Aarhus Convention”. OSCE’s support for the creation of Aarhus Centres has provided an effective means of strengthening the implementation of the Convention at a very practical level. I look forward to our continued co-operation in this area.

In closing, let me reiterate. The UNECE hosts major international environmental conventions; it has extensive experience in preparing and managing environmental legal instruments; and finally, it has a solid track record in co-operating with the OSCE. As a result, in 2007, the UNECE is ready again to be a close partner for the OSCE Chairmanship.

I wish you successful and productive deliberations during the next two days.