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Geneva, 21-23 February 2006
Introductory remarks by the Executive Secretary,
Mr. Marek Belka

Thank you, Mr. Chairperson. Thank you all for being here today, for coming to participate in the sixty-first session of the United Nations Economic Commission for Europe (UNECE).

This is my first Session and as most of you know, I have been on board as Executive Secretary only a few short weeks. However, and as I have said to some of you recently, I have jumped onto a running bus and have therefore also participated from day one in two interrelated and major tasks: Reform implementation and the Annual Session. I thank Ambassador Roux, as well as Mr. Garonna, who worked so closely with you during the Reform, for helping me in this task.

My message to you today will be short. Because first and foremost, I want to hear from you. I have been listening and I will continue to do so. I want to listen to you now during the Annual Session and afterwards. I want to gain an appreciation of your perspectives on the various subjects at hand. The challenge will then be to work with you to reconcile different views that you may have among yourselves.

Demand-driven and flexible but focused…

Ladies and gentlemen, the Reform reaffirmed that ECE facilitates greater economic integration and cooperation among its members and promotes sustainable development and economic prosperity. To help the ECE continue to be an organization that responds to the needs of its members and to their citizens, the Reform restructured the programme of work and emphasized the need for ECE to be demand driven and flexible enough to respond to new demands within the changing environment in Europe. At the same time, in responding to demands, we need to take account of our capacity – we cannot overstretch ourselves to the detriment of quality.

Cooperation with partners…

The Reform also emphasized cooperation with our partners, another point we will discuss today. This is important - ECE is not an isolated island but one piece in a complicated jig-saw puzzle in an over-crowded Europe. ECE needs to find its fit, its value added, and it needs to see how it can work better with others so as to maximize its contribution.

Partnerships do not happen because it is written that such cooperation is desirable. Cooperation happens because each side understands that by working together more can be achieved and each side stands to gain.

I am informed that some of our partnerships work extremely well and we will hear about that today. Others are on the right track. However, I do not think that this potential has been fully exploited in all cases. I think that we need to sell ourselves better to our partners so that they will USE us. And to do this, we need to start by having a better definition of our relationships with other bodies.

I think that our cooperation with the European Commission could be strengthened and I look forward to meeting with the Commission to discuss how this can be realised. The Commission will have its ideas; I have my own. For example, I think the Commission could tap our knowledge and use us in implementing more of its policies, including its new Neighbourhood Policy.

In listening, some of you have emphasized the need to better cooperate with subregional organizations and initiatives, to increase our cooperation with other regions. This is another matter that I look forward to studying and discussing with you.

The economic context…

Of course the reform does not take place in a vacuum. The economic context - the framework in which ECE operates and the issues affecting the region will impact on our work. I am therefore very pleased that I will have a chance to listen to your views about which issues you might want the reformed ECE to take up or concentrate on at some stage, including an expression of your immediate priorities for the new subprogramme to tackle within the framework approved in the Reform.

Global reforms….

The global agenda – the reform of the UN at large will also impact on the ECE as it is part of the

United Nations and I look forward to gain more insight about this as well as to how ECE and its reform can contribute to wider change in the UN. What can be our contribution?

In conclusion, I believe that you would have not gone through the Reform process if you did not believe in what ECE has done and its potential for the future. Our challenge now is to implement the reform. It is a challenge for both you, the Member States, and for us, the secretariat. I believe that by working together we can succeed and I pledge that the secretariat, starting with myself will be full partners in this endeavour.

Thank you.

Ref: ECE/GEN/06/P03