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Geneva, 5 April 2004
Opening Statement by Mrs. Brigita Schmögnerová,
Executive Secretary

Ladies and gentlemen,

On behalf of the United Nations Economic Commission for Europe, it is a great pleasure for me to welcome you all to this Seminar on Aggressive Behaviour on the Road. I am particularly pleased to welcome so many participants from countries outside the UNECE region, including from Africa and Asia.

I also wish to especially welcome the speakers and express my gratitude to them for contributing to this event.

I address a special welcome also to Dr. Margie Peden and, through her, to the World Health Organization, which has cooperated in the organization of this Seminar.

This Seminar is the start of a very important week for road safety, not just in Europe but also across the world. As you know, this Road Safety Week is central to numerous events organized almost everywhere by countries, by the European Union and by many international organizations, including the World Health Organization.

I am pleased to note that Road Safety is starting to mobilize efforts at all levels with a common objective: that of eliminating the global burden of road accidents.

This new awareness is generalized and global, as shown by the Resolutions adopted in 2003 by the United Nations General Assembly, as well as the Report of the Secretary-General, Kofi Annan, also issued in 2003, on the Global Road Safety Crisis.

In this context Resolution No. 253 adopted by the Inland Transport Committee on 19 February 2004 provides full support to the principle that its subsidiary body, the Working Party on Road Traffic Safety, assumes the role of a coordinating body for road safety at the global level.

As many in this room may know, the UNECE has since its creation in 1947 achieved much in addressing all the factors that may prevent road accidents from happening. This includes rules for the construction of safe roads and safe road vehicles, but also traffic rules and safe driver behaviour. The legislative instruments of the UNECE in the field of road safety include the Convention on Road Traffic which dates back to 1949, the Vienna Convention on Road Traffic, the Vienna Convention on Road Signs and Signals of 1968 – to mention just a few.

The implementation of these rules in many countries has contributed to a significant reduction in the number of accidents and victims.

I firmly believe that implementation of these rules in all countries of the world, including transition and developing countries, will contribute to reducing the heavy toll these countries have to pay to mobility. Data on road traffic safety which are reproduced in a brochure “Fourth Road Safety Work” are alarming. In 2001 the total number of accidents in the UNECE region exceeded 4 million. The number of killed exceeded 150,000 and the number of injured almost 5.5 million. If you study the data carefully you will recognize that the number of killed in road accidents in nominal terms is highest in the USA (42,000), followed by the Russian Federation (30,900). In terms of the number of killed in road accidents per million vehicles, the most affected are CIS and SEE countries, with Kyrgyzstan (3253) at the head, followed by Bosnia and Herzegovina (2150) as compared to the USA (162).

In addition to this regulatory work, the United Nations Economic Commission for Europe has, since 1990, also endeavoured to raise the awareness of its 55 member countries to the importance of road safety, by launching « Road Safety Weeks » at regular intervals, now every four years, with a common theme and slogan.

2004 is the year of the Fourth Road Safety Week, which starts today and finishes on 11 April 2004. It is important to note that, in order to have a greater benefit for road safety, the dates of this campaign were deliberately chosen to coincide with the World Health Organization’s World Health Day on 7 April which this year is devoted to road safety.

The theme of this Fourth Road Safety Week is, as you know, « Aggressive behaviour on the road » and the slogan is « Respect is safety ».

Aggressive behaviour is becoming increasingly common on our roads and is at the origin of many serious accidents. It also concerns all countries. What are the causes of this aggressive behaviour? What are its consequences? The object of this Seminar is precisely to reply or at least to attempt to reply to these questions. It is also the object of this Seminar to propose solutions or strategies to combat this aggressive behaviour, thereby making our roads safer and more pleasant to use.

I believe that it is only thanks to the combined efforts of everyone that road accidents will be reduced. As you know road accidents cause not only suffering to victims and their families but have increasing economic and social implications. They increase budgetary expenditures in the health sector and in the social sector, (like disability benefits, social benefits for the families of victims), they increase the costs of the insurance industry, negatively affect employment and employability, and so on.

I would therefore like to assure you that the UNECE will do everything in its power to ensure not only that the Fourth Road Safety Week is a success, but also that its message is implemented and developed.

I am confident that the Seminar today will allow us to find answers to the problems posed. Road traffic offers citizens of our countries liberty, mobility, prosperity and progress. This Seminar must show us ways to drastically reduce road accidents so that citizens may fully enjoy those benefits and economies may prosper.

I wish this Seminar great success and I invite all of you to participate actively in the discussions.

I thank you for your attention.