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“We must make sure that water remains a catalyst for cooperation not conflict among communities and countries” stated United Nations Secretary-General Ban Ki-Moon at the opening of the Budapest Water Summit on 8 October 2013, while underlining the role in this regard of the UNECE Convention on the Protection and Use of Transboundary Watercourses and International Lakes (Water Convention): “This (Convention) will soon be available to all United Nations Member States. I urge countries outside the UNECE region to join the Convention and further develop it.” An amendment opening up this previously regional agreement entered into force in February 2013 and countries are expected to be able to join from early 2014.

The Secretary-General’s words were echoed by Sven Alkalaj, UNECE Executive Secretary, who also underlined the complementarity of the Water Convention with the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Non-navigational Uses of International Watercourses – also known as the United Nations Watercourses Convention. “Cooperation on water resources shared by two or more countries is vital for peace, stability and economic growth and a precondition for sustainable development”, he said.

The United Nations Watercourses Convention is expected to enter into force by the end of 2013, thus creating, with the UNECE Water Convention, a comprehensive international legal framework for transboundary water cooperation and the avoidance of conflict. The new treaty regime will strengthen transboundary water cooperation if, as earlier called for by the Secretary-General, the two legal frameworks are implemented in a synergistic way.

It was against this background that a panel discussion was held later in the Budapest Water Summit, on 9 October, to examine how global frameworks strengthen transboundary water cooperation in practice. During the discussion, the Minister of Agriculture of Tunisia, Mohamed Ben Salem, reconfirmed Tunisia’s interest in joining the UNECE Water Convention — in a spirit of cooperation and good neighbourliness — and also explained how Tunisia was already cooperating with neighbouring countries over shared water resources, such as with Algeria.

Other non-UNECE countries manifested similar intentions. The Ambassador of Iraq to Hungary, on behalf of the Minister of Water Resources of Iraq, Mohanad Salman Al-Sady expressed his country’s willingness to join the UNECE Water Convention, explaining that Iraq believed that the two Conventions — the United Nations Watercourses Convention and the UNECE Water Convention — are “complementary for an effective role in the region in supporting and strengthening the cooperation on sustainable water management”. He further explained that the legal aspects of the United Nations Convention could be perfectly supported by the institutional model that had been developed by the UNECE Convention over the past 20 years.

Katariina Poskiparta, State Secretary in the Finnish Ministry of the Environment, presented her country’s rich experience in transboundary water cooperation and its support of the two global agreements. André Laperrière, Deputy CEO of the Global Environment Facility, provided practical examples of investments under the Facility’s international waters programme.