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Opening statement

by

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at the

**Ministerial Roundtable on Forest Landscape Restoration in the Caucasus and
Central Asia**

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Excellencies, distinguished delegates, ladies and gentlemen,

It is a great pleasure to address you all today at this Roundtable on Forest Landscape Restoration in the Caucasus and Central Asia.

At the outset, I would like to thank Mr. Umirzak Shukeyev, Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of Agriculture of the Republic of Kazakhstan for his leadership and support in organizing this meeting. The invitation to Astana was very welcome, and we are grateful to discuss how to increase the forest cover in the region – a matter close to the hearts of all present in this room.

My gratitude also goes to Mr. Jochen Flasbarth, Secretary of State at the German Ministry for Environment, Nature Conservation and Nuclear Safety. Thanks to his commitment and engagement, not only this project but also the Bonn Challenge came to life, and we hope that in the same spirit we unite for our common cause – our forests. I would also like to express my thanks to the high-level representatives from the Caucasus and Central Asia for being with us today.

This meeting is the first opportunity for your countries to align your national forest restoration and planting efforts with the international Bonn Challenge. Thus, this gathering offers a great chance to gain visibility and recognition at the international level, and to highlight your commitment to sustainable development under the Agenda 2030.

The increase in forest cover and restoration of degraded land is one of the priorities for Kazakh forests. Significant progress has already been achieved by Kazakhstan– including the creation of the “green belt” around Astana, but also the extensive afforestation efforts in the dried out Aral Sea bed.

Taking into account the scale of the challenge, we hope that this Ministerial Roundtable and the Bonn Challenge will help Kazakhstan and the broader Caucasus and Central Asia region to enhance restoration efforts, fulfill international commitments and contribute to global sustainable development.

In the Caucasus and Central Asia region, many landscapes can benefit from restoration, reforestation or afforestation. In particular, forests near settlements, mining sites, riparian forests, and forests on slopes require urgent attention.

When it comes to increasing the forest area, restoration, reforestation and afforestation are best concentrated on areas other than highly valued agricultural land or pastures. In densely populated areas in particular, the

restoration of forests near settlements needs to allow for the use of forests by the local population.

The large number of wild and original fruit species in many of your countries offer unique products and value chains. At the same time, restoration of forests near settlements should be complemented by measures to control grazing, which is known to contribute to their degradation.

You can read more about this topic in the background paper on challenges and opportunities for forest landscape restoration in the Caucasus and Central Asia, which was written by Dr. Niels Thevs in preparation of this meeting. But first and foremost we are eager to hear more about forest landscape restoration from you, distinguished ministers and delegates. This will also allow us to better tailor our activities to your needs.

The United Nations Economic Commission for Europe (UNECE) has excellent relations with your governments, not only in forest-related matters but also in areas such as energy, transport and environment.

On the topic of forests, UNECE has collaborated for 70 years with the Food and Agriculture Organisation through the joint ECE/FAO Forestry and Timber Section, based in Geneva. There are several forest-related projects in the Caucasus and Central Asia managed by the joint section. For example, under the 3-year capacity building project “Accountability System for Sustainable Forest Management in the Caucasus and Central Asia”, Armenia, Georgia, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan started to develop national criteria and indicator sets to monitor sustainable forest management. This forest policy tool will not only help monitor forests and national targets, but also allow for improved communication within and outside the forest sector at the national, regional and international level.

To complement this work, the research and publication on “The State of Forests in the Caucasus and Central Asia” will draw a comprehensive picture of the situation of the forest sector, based on most recent country data and exchange with national experts.

Finally, we address forest landscape restoration with the project “Strengthening capacity of Caucasus and Central Asia to restore deforested and degraded lands in support of the international Bonn Challenge and achievement of SDG 13 & 15”. For this project, Germany, UNECE and FAO joined forces to organize this Ministerial Roundtable, in order to increase knowledge on forest degradation and opportunities for forest landscape restoration, and increase capacity to restore deforested and degraded lands in support of the intentional Bonn

Challenge - a global effort to bring 350 million ha of degraded and deforested land into restoration by 2030. So far, 47 countries from all continents have committed to bring deforested and degraded land into restoration. This is a huge achievement and we are glad to acknowledge that the Caucasus and Central Asian countries are now joining this international movement.

UNECE, and in particular the ECE/FAO Forestry and Timber Section, stands ready to assist you in your efforts and to our collaboration even further.

Thank you again for joining us today; I look forward to fruitful discussions and wish you a successful meeting.