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Distinguished Ministers, UN representatives, distinguished delegates and other participants,

It is an honour to be part of this important occasion. The launch of the Environment Strategy for Countries of Eastern Europe, the Caucasus and Central Asia. The environment ministers of the 12 countries of Eastern Europe, the Caucasus and Central Asia (EECCA) and their Western colleagues met in The Hague in April 2002 to kick-start the Strategy. Since then, our journey has taken us from The Hague, via Johannesburg, Tbilisi and Geneva to Kiev. This symbolises the ownership and involvement of all the countries and regions concerned. But first and foremost, the Strategy is an initiative of the EECCA countries themselves. I commend the Chair of this meeting, Minister Chkhobadze of Georgia, and her deputy, Mr Lomtadze, for their leadership in the comprehensive development of the Environment Strategy.

It is a great success that the new Environment Strategy for the EECCA countries has been adopted here in Kiev. This Strategy, which, as I said, is an initiative of the EECCA countries themselves, is being launched at a historic juncture. While our region has assumed responsibility for putting the Johannesburg Plan of Action into practice, we are on the eve of the enlargement of the European Union, which will create new relationships in Europe.

The development of a new Europe does not stop at EU enlargement. The process must involve the countries of Eastern Europe, the Caucasus and Central Asia. The need to deal with environmental issues in these countries, and with new links between the environment and security – both food security and protection against environmental damage, such as floods, pollution-related disasters and water-related conflicts – calls for new forms of partnerships. These new partnerships are needed to ensure sustainable development in the whole European region, and beyond.

Developing a common environmental strategy is central to these partnerships.

The Strategy is highly innovative in that it deals with transboundary environmental problems on the basis of close cooperation. This is crucial. Not only because many of these countries share borders, rivers and lakes, and form part of the same eco-regions. But also because many current and future environmental problems and dangers have common roots and are specific to economies in transition.

Adoption of the Strategy will imply active support for continued efforts to fulfil the seven environmental objectives it sets out. It will mean forming and contributing to partnerships, as well as other modes of bilateral and multilateral cooperation. And it will mean transferring knowledge, building capacity and stimulating investment in the range of programmes that will be developed within the framework of the Strategy (for example, the EU water initiative).

Many different players need to get actively involved. Not just national authorities, but also international organisations and banks, the GEF, as well as the Regional Environmental Centres – the so-called new REC’s in the EECCA countries themselves, as well as the old REC in Central Europe - and NGOs. NGOs have played an impressively active role in developing the Strategy, in all 12 countries of the region. Their continued involvement will greatly contribute to its implementation, fostering transparency and promoting high standards. The participation of civil society in this process is crucial.
The private sector has not been sufficiently involved in the development of the Strategy. We must therefore make every effort to get business to actively contribute to its implementation.

Effective expert coordination is also crucial, in every area of activity within the Strategy. The EAP task force is excellently suited to coordinate this process in a professional way, while increasing levels of ownership by the EECCA countries.

The Netherlands has supported the Environment Strategy for Countries of Eastern Europe, the Caucasus and Central Asia from the very beginning, when there were still doubts about its political viability. And we will continue to support it.

To be more specific, in recent years my ministry has contributed to the Environment for Europe Process, by giving substantial financial assistance to the EAP Task Force, and the Project Preparation Committee (PPC). Thanks to the excellent work of these organisations, we were able to contribute to projects in the field of compliance and enforcement, urban water supply and sanitation, and energy efficiency.

Anticipating the implementation of the new Environment Strategy for the countries of Eastern Europe, the Caucasus and Central Asia, we increased our contribution to the EAP Task Force in 2002. And we intend to do the same in 2003. With regard to the PPC, we agreed to support the post of PPC officer, as well as the Dutch Environmental Technical Cooperation Fund at the EBRD. This fund is intended to support the development of environmental investment projects in the EECCA region.

And last year, after the WSSD in Johannesburg, we started to support a joint project being carried out by the New Regional Environmental Centres (New RECs) to facilitate the gradual transfer of expertise and tasks to the region. I’m convinced that the New RECs are in an ideal position to coordinate the efforts of civil society, local and national government, neighbouring countries and other partners. We therefore want to continue our support for these centres, to further develop their coordinating function. But I agree that this only can be done in close cooperation with the secretariat of the EAP Task Force. And that we should develop a phased plan for the transfer of knowledge and tasks.

To conclude, distinguished Ministers and delegates, we now have an impressive Strategy on paper. Let us lose no time in putting it into action. We face a challenging task, in a difficult geopolitical setting, with limited financial and human resources. As well as the essential work performed by experts, we need high level political commitment. Not only today, but also in the months and years ahead. I will follow the implementation of the Strategy closely, and I call upon other Ministers throughout the UNECE region to do so too.

I therefore look forward to discussing the progress made in the implementation of the Strategy, in particular its first concrete results, in one year from now, as has been planned.