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**Opening Statement**

**by**

**Mr. Sven ALKALAJ**

**United Nations Under-Secretary-General**

**Executive Secretary of the United Nations Economic Commission for Europe**

**at**

**the Seventh Session of the SPECA Governing Council**

**Bangkok, 28 November 2012**

Mr. Chairperson, Excellences, Ladies and Gentlemen,

It is an honor and a pleasure for me to open the seventh session of the SPECA Governing Council hosted by our sister-Commission, UNESCAP, with which UNECE jointly supports the Programme. The high level of participation of member countries in this important event is a clear sign of the importance they attach to regional economic cooperation and to SPECA.

Let me first say a few words about the Economic Forum that ended this morning. The discussion provided ample food for thought for all of us. It confirmed that developing regional cooperation is a highly complex process which requires political will, mutual trust, patience, expertise and careful selection of methods and forms that can bring sustainable results. In recent years, SPECA Economic Forums have looked into the European, Eurasian and now the Asian experience. I very much hope that these highly informative discussions on the different approaches to and models of economic cooperation and integration will stimulate further joint thinking in the SPECA framework. In the future, the Governments of participating countries might decide to start a step by step process of building up sustainable, indigenous organizational and institutional frameworks for regional economic cooperation and integration in Central Asia.

Let me now turn to a key issue on our agenda: the strengthening of SPECA. As you are aware, the main task of the Governing Council is to provide strategic guidance to the Programme. This requires a regular review of its overall functioning. Just a few years after the establishment of SPECA, delegations expressed concern about the low number of projects implemented in its framework. In 2004, the UN Secretary General, in a letter addressed to the Presidents of SPECA participating countries, promised to revamp the Programme. Subsequently, a comprehensive reform of SPECA was adopted at the Conference on Strengthening Subregional Economic Cooperation in Central Asia and the Future Role of SPECA, hosted by the Government of Kazakhstan in Astana in May 2005. The reform included a new governing structure for the Programme and the holding of regular Economic Forum meetings. It also increased the number of Project Working Groups from two to six. As a result of this reform, the number of projects implemented in the framework of SPECA has increased considerably since 2005.

Notwithstanding these improvements, at recent Governing Council meetings several delegations urged the two Regional Commissions to further expand project implementation in the SPECA framework. To meet this demand, the Programme needs to be further strengthened. This could be achieved through stronger ownership by its member countries. The Proposal on Further Strengthening the UN Special Programme for the Economies of Central Asia, jointly developed by the UNECE and UNESCAP and distributed to you before this meeting, describes a coherent set of

measures which in our view could improve both the governance of the Programme and further expand project implementation.

First, SPECA should be used more effectively to raise the awareness of policy-makers and experts to the benefits of regional cooperation in enhancing the ability of countries to successfully achieve the UN Development Goals and other relevant priorities identified by UN summits. SPECA offers a framework for providing a subregional perspective to the discussions on the post 2015 Development Agenda and the practical follow-up to and implementation of the Rio+20 outcomes, in particular those related to the green economy in the context of sustainable development and poverty reduction.

Second, the Proposal encourages SPECA member countries to play a more active role in formulating project proposals and working with donors in order to raise funds for these projects. The UNECE and UNESCAP have achieved considerable successes in raising extra-budgetary funds for SPECA projects. However, the current economic crisis is negatively affecting development assistance by multilateral and bilateral donors: this necessitates joint fundraising efforts by the two Regional Commissions and SPECA countries.

Third, an important step towards improving the functioning of SPECA would be the adoption of the draft Terms of Reference that were also circulated to you before this meeting. One and a half decades after its establishment, the Programme is still operating without clear rules. The proposed Terms of Reference will establish rules for decision making, procedures for the adoption of work plans and progress reports, election of the Chair and many other issues essential for the proper functioning of the Programme. The Terms of Reference will help SPECA countries to better understand how to govern SPECA more effectively and benefit more from its activities.

Fourth, improving cooperation of SPECA with regional/sub-regional organizations, programmes and donors has always been high on the agenda of the Governing Council. On the basis of several years of practical experience, the Proposal on Further Strengthening the UN Special Programme for the Economies of Central Asia encourages regular information exchange and coordination with all relevant development partners as well as the development of partnerships for the implementation of specific programmes and projects. The side event on Afghanistan on Monday was a good example of this. In my view, this is the format which has the greatest potential to strengthen the impact of SPECA activities on regional cooperation. Another good example is the evolving partnership between UNECE, the World Bank, the Swiss Development Cooperation and the German International Cooperation Agency in improving the management of information on water, energy and hydrometeorology in Central Asia. Each partner is taking the lead in an area

where it has comparative advantages: UNECE, for example, is in charge of the legal and institutional aspects of information management.

In the course of the next year my colleague, Ms. Heyzer and I plan to visit – possible jointly – the capitals of SPECA countries to discuss issues of regional cooperation and also to consult on the Proposal on Further Strengthening the UN Special Programme for the Economies of Central Asia at the political level. Based on these consultations the secretariats of the two Regional Commissions will prepare a draft decision on strengthening SPECA that will be presented for discussion and adoption at the eighth session of the Governing Council planned for the last quarter of 2013.

In conclusion, I would like to express my sincere gratitude to the Government of Turkmenistan for the active and successful Chairmanship of SPECA between 2010 and 2012. The follow-up meeting of the 2010 SPECA Economic Forum and the 2011 SPECA Economic Forum and Governing Council meetings, so ably hosted by Turkmenistan, were memorable highlights of Turkmenistan's Chairmanship.

I wish you success in the consideration of the rich agenda before us today.

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