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**Statement by Mr. Ján Kubiš  
United Nations Under-Secretary-General  
Executive Secretary of the United Nations  
Economic Commission for Europe**

**at the High Level Public Hearing, European Parliament**

**Brussels, 12 October 2010**

Mr. Chairperson,  
Distinguished Participants,  
Ladies and Gentlemen,

Let me express my sincere gratitude to the Climate Change, Biodiversity and Sustainable Development Intergroup and personally to MEP Struan Stevenson for organizing this very timely meeting.

The easy and seemingly obvious answer to the question *Can the Aral Sea be saved?* would be a flat no. The Aral Sea ecosystem, as it was, is probably forever lost and to physically re-establish the sea might prove to be an unrealistic objective for generations. Economic and social costs of drastically reducing water use from the two large rivers – Syrdarya and Amudarya – are high. Water flows to the Sea can be increased but this would be a long-term process.

But the consequences of the environmental disaster need to be addressed! I would like to express my appreciation to the efforts of all Central Asian governments that are putting considerable resources into mitigating the socio-economic consequences of the disaster and saving the remaining parts of the Sea and river deltas. The efforts by the Government of Kazakhstan in restoring the Northern part of the Aral Sea should serve as an encouragement for all of us.

Some steps have been taken, but more needs to be done! The most burning environmental, social and health problems must be addressed. A regional strategy for achieving environmental sustainability in the Aral Sea basin should be developed and

implemented without delay. The looming challenges of climate change that causes a rapid melting of glaciers and increasingly irregular weather patterns, as well as the expected increase in water use due to demographic trends and economic development need to be taken into account. National efforts can achieve certain improvements but sustainable solutions would require a comprehensive, long-term regional strategy.

Achieving economic, environmental and social sustainability in the Aral Sea basin would require at least three things: expressed political will by all the Governments; serious research based on comprehensive monitoring and modelling; and an increase of resources spent on projects supporting this objective.

While the Governments of the Aral Sea basin must play the main role in this process, the international community can and should make decisive contributions. UNECE's efforts are focused on laying the foundation for the elaboration of long-term solutions to the complex challenges faced by the countries of the Aral Sea Basin. Let me give you some examples.

UNECE is implementing a 2 million US dollar programme entitled "Regional Dialogue and Cooperation on Water Resources Management" financed by the Government of Germany through GTZ in the framework of the Berlin Water Process. The Berlin Water Process in turn is part of the Water and Environmental Pillar of the Central Asia Strategy of the European Union. The Programme consists of four elements: capacity building on international water law; strengthening regional institutions; modernizing legal frameworks for water resources management; and improving water monitoring and data exchange. Implementation of the Programme started in April 2009 with the adoption of the Joint Statement of the Summit Meeting of the Heads of States Founders of the International Fund for Saving the Aral Sea (IFAS). The Summit provided a strong political mandate to the Executive Committee of IFAS – the main partner of the UNECE in the implementation of the Programme.

This joint work by the UNECE and the Executive Committee of the International Fund for Saving the Aral Sea is assisting the countries of the Basin to lay a solid foundation for progress towards environmental sustainability. It is strengthening regional institutions and legal frameworks, which is a sine qua non for joint work of these countries to resolve their protracted disputes over the complex problems of the water and energy nexus, to build confidence and agree on a long term strategy. Strong regional institutions are necessary to unite the impressive research capacity of the countries of the region so they are able to undertake the formidable task of effective and neutral decision-support by providing comprehensive data and analysis. And EC IFAS is now undertaking efforts to improve the elaboration, coordination and monitoring of projects implemented in the framework of the Third Aral Sea Basin Programme, a five-year programme of action aimed at improving the environmental, social, health and economic situation in the Aral Sea basin. This is vitally necessary to regain the confidence of international donors and improve the effectiveness of programme implementation.

United Nations efforts to address problems of the water and energy nexus need high-level political support if they are to be successful. During his visit to the countries of Central Asia, Secretary General Ban Ki-moon invited Governments to work constructively with the UN on the resolution of environmental problems of the Aral Sea Basin and work for more effective management of their water resources at the regional level. I regularly meet with high-level representatives of the Governments of Central Asian countries to strengthen confidence among these countries and build the political will to act together.

But UNECE activities in the environmental field in Central Asia are not limited to the programme I have just mentioned. In the framework of the UN Special Programme for the Economies of Central Asia (SPECAs), the Strategy for Rational and Efficient Use of Water and Energy Resources in Central Asia (2004) was developed to outline the prospects for collective action to secure a sustainable future for energy and water resources development in the region.

Next week the UNECE hosts the SPECAs Economic Forum entitled “Strengthening Regional Cooperation in Central Asia: A Contribution to Long-Term Stability and Sustainable Development of Afghanistan”. The Forum will provide an opportunity to discuss, among others, how to avoid through effective joint management of shared resources potential conflicts due to increased water use from the Amudarya river as a result of plans to expand irrigated areas and to develop hydropower in Afghanistan.

The UNECE is the custodian of several relevant international legal instruments. The UNECE Convention on the Protection and Use of Transboundary Watercourses and International Lakes (Water Convention) and other UNECE legal instruments, like the Espoo Convention on Environmental Impact Assessment in a Transboundary Context, offer neutral frameworks for the elaboration of cooperative solutions to existing disputes.

The UNECE also offers a framework for cooperation on water and environmental matters between Central Asian countries and their neighbours. Tomorrow, a subregional workshop in Almaty will bring together Central Asian countries and their neighbours – Afghanistan, Islamic Republic of Iran, Russian Federation, China and Mongolia – to discuss the state of transboundary waters in that subregion.

Last but not least, let me mention that UNECE is a leading partner in implementing the National Policy Dialogues under the EU Water Initiative in the countries of Central Asia. The National Policy Dialogues on Integrated Water Resources Management (IWRM), that involve all relevant ministries and agencies (water, energy, environment, health and sanitation), support the introduction of IWRM at the national and river-basin level, and complement the efforts to improve water management at the regional level.

In the last twenty years significant funds have been spent on improving the

ecological situation in the Aral Sea Basin. Still, there is a striking gap between the needs and available resources. This makes it imperative for donors to focus resources on programmes and projects that offer maximum added value in terms of clear vision, sustainability and multiplier effect.

The *EU Strategy for Central Asia* is now more than three years old. The Strategy explicitly mentions the UNECE as an implementing partner. Member States, such as Germany in the framework of the Berlin Water Process or Finland in the framework of Wider Europe Initiative put much needed resources into programmes that fit well into the Strategy. The implementation of the Strategy would greatly benefit from strengthened support of the European Commission to programmes that have proven to contribute most effectively to the achievement of key objectives of the Strategy. UNECE programmes mentioned above are among them.

Support by the European Union can be more effective if it is coordinated with activities of the Governments of Central Asian countries and other members of the donor community. The effectiveness of donors' coordination by the Executive Committee of IFAS has significantly improved in recent months, thanks to overall efforts – including assistance provided by the European Commission - to strengthen IFAS. There is every hope that the Third Aral Sea Basin Programme being developed by EC-IFAS will become an effective framework for information exchange, coordination, monitoring and evaluation of projects aimed at achieving environmental sustainability in the Aral Sea basin. The international development community should encourage, assist and make full use of donors' coordination by EC IFAS and its regional partners. UNECE is actively participating in the development of this Third Aral Sea Basin Programme and looks forward to contributing to its implementation.

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