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**Statement at the Consultations on Enhancing Security in Afghanistan and  
Central Asia through Regional Cooperation on Water**

Brussels, December 7, 2010

**United Nations Economic Commission for Europe**

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I would like to sincerely thank the organizers for convening this highly topical meeting and for inviting the United Nations Economic Commission for Europe. Afghanistan is a member State of the UN Special Programme for the Economies of Central Asia, which is supported by the UNECE and UNESCAP. Last year in Bishkek at the SPECA Governing Council the Representative of Afghanistan spoke about the need for closer economic cooperation between Central Asia and Afghanistan as an important contribution to the long-term stabilization and reconstruction of his country. He underlined the importance of improved transport and trade links and enhanced supply of gas and electricity to Afghanistan and proposed to Central Asian partners to exchange ideas and jointly address shared challenges. Consequently, this year's SPECA Economic Forum on October 18 and 19 was devoted to the discussion of how strengthened regional cooperation in Central Asia can contribute to the long-term stability and sustainable development of Afghanistan. High-level representatives of SPECA member countries, the UN and partner organizations discussed among others how Afghanistan and Central Asia could jointly manage their shared water resources. Let me elaborate on relevant conclusions and recommendations of the Forum.

Participants agreed that the countries of the region share a common interest in preventing the rise of militancy and extremism, the spread of organized crime, in particular drug and weapons trafficking and illegal migration. Since many of these threats are regional, it would require strengthened regional cooperation to successfully counter them. Ensuring strong and sustainable development of the economies of the region is a sine qua non for achieving long-term stability. Therefore a regional approach must have a sound economic underpinning. There is no doubt that Central Asia can and should significantly contribute to the long-term stabilization and reconstruction of Afghanistan. The broader region has the potential to hugely benefit from the formation of the giant Eurasian economic space not only as an important energy and raw material supplier and as an evolving transport hub but also as a market and a production base.

But discussions during the SPECA Economic Forum highlighted not only the advantages and opportunities offered by strengthened economic cooperation between Central Asia and Afghanistan. Speakers reminded of the challenges, too, in particular potential disputes over shared water resources. Agricultural growth and productivity in Afghanistan is fundamental for sustainable economic development. According to the Afghan National Development Strategy (ANDS) the country needs to improve rural livelihoods through rehabilitation and reconstruction work on small, medium and large traditional irrigation schemes and by building new ones. It is also emphasized that irrigated agriculture offers an economically viable alternative to poppy cultivation. Another, potentially important use of the Amudarya is hydro-power. Building hydro-power stations on the tributaries of the Amudarya – e.g. the Kokcha and Kunduz – may partly address the considerable energy deficiency of Afghanistan.

At present Afghanistan diverts only a small amount of water from the Amudarya and its tributaries (estimates range between 2 and 5 billion cubic meters) to feed irrigation networks. If development plans are realized, water withdrawal will gradually increase. Afghanistan is an upstream country with direct and uninterrupted access to the waters it depends upon. The willingness of Kabul to work with its Central Asian neighbors on the joint management of shared water resources should be welcomed as a strong commitment to regional cooperation. Integrating Afghanistan in regional water resources management, however, is a complex, long-term task.

Water supplies in Central Asia are under stress already. Economic development and demographic growth are likely to further increase demand for water. Climate change is resulting in a continuous decrease in the area of glaciers. While this is leading to increased runoff on the short run, within a few decades – or even sooner - a significant reduction in water supply can be expected.

The competing demands of agriculture in downstream countries and hydropower generation in upstream countries fuel serious political disputes in Central Asia. The plans by Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan to build new large hydropower stations have raised particularly strong objections by Uzbekistan, which fears seismological and environmental risks. The lack of mutual confidence and over-politicization of these issues make it difficult for outside experts to give advice or undertake environmental feasibility studies, no matter how high professional standards and strong safeguards they offer.

While Central Asian countries have so far managed to resolve their disputes over water in a peaceful way, warning signs of tensions are there. Extreme drought and an increased need for electricity due to an unusually cold winter in 2008-2009 lead to a water-energy and food crisis in Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan. And although water supply in 2010 is ample, on 3 April this year in Ashgabat the Interstate Commission for Water Coordination could not reach consensus and adopt the protocol on water withdrawal limits from the Amudarya and Syrdarya during the 2010 vegetation period. This shows an unusual level of political tension among Central Asian countries.

Why this over-politicization of issues related to water? The shrinking of the Aral Sea – one of the greatest man-made environmental disasters of the 20-21 centuries – has affected the livelihoods and health of millions of people. The slow-onset tragedy provided a shocking example to generations of the

disastrous consequences of environmentally unsustainable use of water resources. This partially explains the sensitivity of Central Asian countries to any water related issue. On the positive side, the tragedy is a driving force of regional cooperation: countries of the basin will adopt in a few days the Third Aral Sea Basin Program, a five-year program of action aimed at achieving environmental sustainability in the Basin. The UNECE has provided comprehensive support to the elaboration of this document and will continue supporting the Executive Committee of the International Fund for Saving the Aral Sea in its implementation.

Have disputes over problems of the water and energy nexus become a serious stumbling block hindering regional cooperation in Central Asia or is it rather vice versa: the lack of confidence and political tensions hinder the elaboration of rational, cooperative, mutually advantageous solutions to these problems? The probable answer is both. We have been witnessing a negative spiral during the last two decades: insufficient level of regional cooperation hindered the development of an efficient regional system of integrated water resources management and with the passage of years water problems have grown more and more pressing, thus generating political tensions. In the absence of strong institutional frameworks for regional cooperation, convincing legal guarantees and in view of poor implementation record of decisions taken by regional bodies, countries often favored national water projects versus more efficient regional solutions.

Integrating Afghanistan in the system of regional water resources management is a challenge and an opportunity. Afghanistan might become a catalyst for strengthened cooperation: there is no other way to establish a long-term partnership between Afghanistan and Central Asia and involve the former in the joint management of shared water resources than through a fundamental rethinking of the basic tenets of intra-regional cooperation. Central Asia and Afghanistan need to develop a truly comprehensive approach to the regional management of shared water resources, taking fully into account political, security, economic, legal, environmental and technical aspects. This is a tall order, but nothing less would bring sustainable results. The overwhelming importance of Afghanistan for the international community would guarantee the necessary political, economic and donor support to this process.

What could be done to avoid potential conflict and develop mutually advantageous cooperation between Afghanistan and Central Asia in the management of regional water resources?

a) Building confidence and political will

There is the need to engage policymakers of Central Asian countries and Afghanistan in a continuous process of building confidence and political will to cooperate. Water was high on the agenda of the visit by UN Secretary General Ban Ki-moon last April to the five Central Asian capitals. The regular visits by UNECE Executive Secretary Jan Kubis to Central Asia or activities of the UN Regional Centre for Preventive Diplomacy should be mentioned here too.

While earlier the work of the Regional Economic Cooperation Conference on Afghanistan focused mainly on the southern and western neighbors of the

country, the next RECCA meeting will be hosted by Tajikistan. This offers another opportunity for the international community to engage the countries of the broader region in a constructive dialogue.

b) Introducing integrated management of water resources

Most experts agree that only the integrated management of regional water resources can offer sustainable solutions to the complex challenges of the water and energy nexus. All interested sectors and agencies – agriculture, energy, environment, health, communal development and economy – need to work together in a systematic way to ensure the most efficient management of this precious resource.

c) Technical solutions need political, legal and institutional backing

In recent decades Central Asian and international experts have developed a great variety of models and technical solutions to the challenges of regional water resources management. But no matter how well-tested, rational and efficient a regional model or technical solution might be, it is unlikely to work if it is not combined with strong regional institutions, with reliable legal guarantees, with mutual confidence and expressed political will by the Governments to implement it and last but not least, if it is not economically feasible.

d) Developing a market-based economic model for the water and energy nexus

In Soviet times, upstream countries bartered summer electricity for fossil fuels supplied by downstream countries in winter time. The transition of Central Asian countries to market economy requires market-conform solutions to economic problems related the water and energy nexus. The development of a regional energy market – that includes Afghanistan – would help reduce competition between the energy and irrigation sectors. Revenues from the export of electricity generated in the summer irrigation period could be used by upstream countries to buy fossil fuels in winter time.

e) Solutions should be based on international water law

The UNECE Convention on the Protection and Use of Transboundary Watercourses and International Lakes with its strong institutions, expert pool, resources and detailed implementation guidelines offers an efficient tool to help solve bilateral and regional disputes over water. Two countries – Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan – are parties to the Convention while others – including Afghanistan – are participating in its activities and some expressed interest in joining it. The five Central Asian countries and Afghanistan need extensive capacity building on international water law, so they can properly interpret and use the Convention to resolve their disputes and develop the bona fide cooperation required by it. The UNECE is providing intensive assistance to the six countries in this area. In April 2009 it conducted – together with the UN Regional Centre for Preventive Diplomacy – a regional

seminar on international water law, in which Afghanistan also participated. Since then the UNECE has conducted national capacity building workshops in Kazakhstan and Turkmenistan and is planning to organize similar events in Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan and Uzbekistan. Thanks to generous funding by the Government of France the UNECE continues to involve Afghanistan in all relevant activities of the Water Convention.

f) Regional institutions and legal frameworks need to be strengthened

Strong and modern regional institutions and legal frameworks are a sine qua non for effective water resources management. This was recognized by the Heads of States Founders of the International Fund for Saving the Aral Sea (IFAS) during their Summit Meeting in April 2009 in Almaty, when they expressed “willingness to improve the institutional and contractual legal framework of IFAS”. The UNECE is providing support to IFAS to the implementation of this important political mandate in the framework of a three year, USD 2 Million program financed by the Government of Germany in the framework of the Berlin Process – which is part of the Water and Environmental Pillar of the Central Asia Strategy of the European Union.

The present obsolete legal framework and fragmented institutions could hamper efforts to involve Afghanistan in regional cooperation. On the other hand, modern, strong institutions would need to work with all riparian states, including Afghanistan, if they want to collect, analyze and share hydro-meteorological data on the full length of the basin of the Amudarya and develop and implement comprehensive regional strategies for water resources management.

g) Afghan and Central Asian experts should share data, knowledge and work together on future challenges, like climate change

Developing effective regional strategies for climate change adaptation or the achievement of environmental sustainability in the Aral Sea Basin would require solid data and analysis. In contrast to the information available about the Syrdarya, knowledge about the water resources in the upper part of the Amudarya is limited. Afghan and Central Asian expert should start working together on water resources monitoring and assessment. Institutions in hydrology, glaciology, water quality, flood risk reduction and forecast should develop a network possessing adequate technical means and skills. A USD 150 000 program by the UNECE, funded by the Government of the Russian Federation is expected to start next year to facilitate such cooperation.<sup>1</sup>

Central Asian research institutes, like SIC ICWC, have developed a broad-range of water-management related know-how and technologies that are well-adapted to the conditions of the region and can be easily applied in Afghanistan. Programs to rehabilitate and improve irrigation systems in Afghanistan would benefit from more extensive cooperation with Central Asian partners, e.g. in the framework of IFAS.

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<sup>1</sup> The project will first focus on Afghanistan and Tajikistan, since they have already developed cooperation in some areas.

- h) The need to involve Afghanistan in regional cooperation on water resources management should be approached in the broader perspective of regional economic development, stability and security

This meeting today at the European Parliament with the participation of a variety of partners - governments, inter-governmental organization, parliamentarians, NGOs and academia – is a good example for such an approach.

The UNECE will continue supporting dialogue between Afghanistan and its Central Asian partners in the framework of the UN Special Programme for the Economies of Central Asia. Next spring the Government of Turkmenistan will host a follow-up event of the SPECA Economic. Co-organized by the UNECE and UNRCCA in close cooperation with the RECCA Secretariat in Kabul, the meeting will offer an opportunity for Afghanistan and Central Asian countries, donors and implementing agencies to discuss a broad range of project proposals and ideas on strengthening regional cooperation.

There are other opportunities for fostering high-level dialogue. Parliaments in Central Asia have become increasingly active in such areas of regional cooperation as water resources management, energy or the environment. Members of the European Parliament are in a good position to start a high-level dialogue among parliamentarians and policy-makers on cooperation between Afghanistan and Central Asia on water.

A joint session of MP-s of the European Parliament interested in Afghanistan, Central Asia or the environment on the one hand and Speakers of the parliaments of Central Asian countries and Afghanistan with the involvement of members of relevant parliamentary committees on the other, could discuss all aspects of developing cooperation between Afghanistan and Central Asia on regional water resources management. Chairmen of the environmental, economic and foreign affairs committees could be invited to participate. International organizations and multilateral donors active in the region could be asked to provide background information and expert advice.

Participants could hammer out recommendations for the resolution of problems linked with the water and energy nexus in Central Asia, e.g. agreeing on the need to replace disputes over artificially isolated, narrow issues with a truly comprehensive dialogue. Parliamentarians would be in a better position than representatives of individual ministries or agencies to adopt such a broad, comprehensive approach.

Besides developing a broad vision and sending a clear message of support to Afghanistan and Central Asia, the discussion could produce new ideas for the European Union too. The EU, as a large donor, could be encouraged to allocate more resources to regional programs – although national projects are arguably easier to implement. The EU, as the most important export market of Central Asia could offer economic incentives to reduce dependence on water-intensive cotton production in order to achieve sustainable water use. And the EU could support regional efforts for climate change adaptation, among others by helping governments to take full advantage of public and private sources of external funding and technology.

If thanks to coordinated efforts Afghanistan and Central Asia would make real progress towards the joint management of their shared water resources the importance of it would go far beyond water. It would be a clear signal that the countries of the region are prepared to make the difficult political compromises necessary to strengthen their own security, stability and sustainable development through regional cooperation.