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UNITED NATIONS
ECONOMIC COMMISSION
FOR EUROPE

Opening Statement on behalf of the UNECE at the First Meeting of the Working Group on Institutional and Legal Strengthening and ASBP-3

10 December 2009, Almaty

We see the decisions of the April Summit Meeting of the Heads of States Founders of the International Fund for Saving the Aral Sea as an exceptionally important window of opportunity to start real, sustainable progress towards the solution of complex, often controversial issues related to water, energy and environment in Central Asia. To have a real chance of success, this process needs to start with the establishment of strong, modern, effective regional institutions. Participants of the Summit meeting, government decision makers and experts alike all seem to agree that regional institutions and legal frameworks in their present form are ill-suited to provide effective assistance to the solution of the serious and persisting problems of water and energy among IFAS member States and even less able to cope with emerging challenges, like climate change.

The United Nations Economic Commission for Europe (UNECE) helps EC IFAS and other regional institutions in the implementation of the strategic tasks given to them by the April Summit Meeting of the Heads of States Founders of the International Fund for Saving the Aral Sea. This program is financed by the Government of Germany through GTZ, in the framework of the Berlin Process.

What can the UNECE bring to the table? It offers an impartial UN umbrella, best-practices from all over the world, in-house expertise and a direct link to the UNECE environmental instruments, in particular the Water Convention and its institutional mechanisms. In addition, UNECE experts ensure regular coordination with the donors' community and key regional and international organizations on strategies and activities in the water, energy and environmental sectors.

The decision by the UN General Assembly on granting an observer status to IFAS signals willingness of the UN to effectively cooperate and work with the Fund.

The Summit handed EC IFAS a strategic task. Cosmetic changes will not suffice: the experience of the last 18 years have thought that piece-meal solutions don't produce real, lasting effects. Only coherent, serious strengthening and, if necessary, reform of

the existing institutional setup and legal frameworks would attract the attention and resources of international donors and regional and international organizations.

Strengthening regional institutions and legal frameworks is a complicated task, requiring an open mind, long-term vision and readiness to compromise from all participants.

First, it is important to clearly focus on institutions and legal frameworks: bringing in other issues – no matter how important or relevant they are - would definitely overburden the agenda and derail discussions.

A new, strengthened institutional setup must be owned by all five member States. Its mandate, structure, rules of decision-making, geographical location, legal basis must ensure complete equality of the five sovereign States that are members of it.

Of course, strengthening or reform of this magnitude requires a realistic time-frame. Having said this, it would be crucial to agree on a comprehensive package of proposals on institutional and legal strengthening within the time-frame set by the Summit Meeting, including an agreed road-map or time-table for their implementation. And the deadline here may be the date when the ASBP-3 is going to be presented and approved. It would be essential to present a package of agreed proposals on institutional and legal strengthening at the same time when the ASBP-3 is presented in order to convince governments and the donors' community to commit the significant resources that are likely to be required for the implementation of these proposals. Including institutional strengthening among the main directions of ASBP-3 makes perfect sense but only if it means inviting donors to finance the implementation of this huge, strategic project – the renewal of regional institutions and modernization of legal frameworks.

I would like to wish you every success in this difficult work. It is a privilege for the UNECE team to work with a group of outstanding experts like you. Let me assure you: we will make every effort to support this exceptional work as best as we can.