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Opening Statement

on behalf of

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United Nations Under-Secretary-General

Executive Secretary of the United Nations Economic Commission for Europe

delivered by

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**Rio+20: an Opportunity for Strengthened Regional Cooperation in
Central Asia**

at

**High-level Segment of the SPECA Economic Forum, First session
Almaty, 21 November 2013**

Excellencies, Ladies and Gentlemen,

The United Nations Conference on Sustainable Development (Rio+20) in June 2012 has generated new momentum for achieving sustainable development, with governments renewing their political commitment to drive progress in the social, economic and environmental spheres. The outcome document, “The future we want,” acknowledges the importance of the regional dimension of sustainable development and the role of regional frameworks to complement and facilitate effective translation of sustainable development policies into concrete action at the national level. It also emphasizes that regional and subregional organizations have a significant role to play in promoting a balanced integration of the economic, social and environmental dimensions of sustainable development in their respective regions. The General Assembly urged these institutions, among others, the UNECE, to prioritize sustainable development through more efficient and effective capacity-building, development and implementation of regional agreements, and exchange of information, best practices and lessons learned.

The Rio+20 outcome document also requests to further speed up the implementation of the “Almaty Programme of Action” which addresses the special development needs and the challenges faced by landlocked developing countries, including the countries of SPECA.

Recognizing the inter-linkages between the economic, social and environmental aspects of development is indispensable in Central Asia – a region that is facing formidable environmental challenges that directly influence economic

development and the health and well-being of millions of people. Examples of these challenges include: the Aral Sea tragedy and its grave consequences; irregular weather patterns caused by climate change and which result in more frequent droughts and floods; the increasing strain on the water resources of the region; uranium tailings that threaten the drinking water of millions of people; as well as polluted water and soil resulting from unsustainable agricultural practices. None of these challenges can be effectively addressed at the national level only, as the ecosystems of the Aral Sea Basin are closely connected, among others by its two main river basins, the Syr Darya and Amu Darya.

The Rio+20 outcome document underlines the need for effective governance, including at the regional level. It speaks about the importance of strengthening institutional frameworks, including through reform. SPECA itself, supported by the two UN Regional Commissions, provides such a framework for regional cooperation on sustainable development.

Let me now talk about some specific areas in which SPECA activities can support the implementation of Rio+20 outcomes in Central Asia.

These areas are:

- a) Water resource management
- b) Energy efficiency and renewable energy
- c) Sustainable cities and urban settlements
- d) The social, economic and environmental benefits of Forests
- e) Transport , and
- f) Trade

One important area where the UNECE is providing regional assistance on the environment is the strengthening of the International Fund for Saving the Aral Sea and, within it, the Inter-State Commission on Sustainable Development. In a few minutes you will hear the report and recommendations from the Task Force of the Scientific Information Center of ICSD, which has been supported by the UNECE and UNEP, on how a strengthened ICSD could contribute to the more effective implementation of Rio+20.

Rio+20 recognizes the importance for decision making based on integrated social, economic and environmental data and information, as well as on the effective analysis and assessment of implementation. Accordingly, there are recommendations from the Scientific Information Center of the ICSD Task Force that underline the necessity of reviewing, in the light of the Rio+20 outcomes, the Regional Environmental Action Plan adopted in 2002 and that propose to improve the regional management of environmental data.

Rio + 20 also recognized that “water is at the core of sustainable development as it is closely linked to a number of key global challenges”. As a result, it reaffirms the commitment of the international community to the development of integrated water resource management and water efficiency, ensuring sustainable water use. The UNECE is promoting efficient and integrated water resources management at the regional level both through SPECA projects and through its support to the International Fund for Saving the Aral, also known as IFAS. The proposals on institutional and legal strengthening of IFAS,

developed by its Executive Committee with UNECE support, if adopted, will greatly strengthen the ability of the Fund and its institutions to effectively manage transboundary water resources in accordance with the principles of integrated water resources management.

The Rio+20 outcome document also states that “improving energy efficiency, increasing the share of renewable energy and cleaner and energy efficient technologies are important for sustainable development, including in addressing climate change”. The UNECE is supporting SPECA countries in improving energy efficiency, including through the introduction and adaptation of energy efficient technologies. The “Regional meeting on promotion and financing of innovative green technologies” last Tuesday and Wednesday was only the latest in a series of capacity building activities that will continue in the future.

Hydropower is by far the most extensively used renewable energy in Central Asia. UNECE’s support to the institutional and legal strengthening of IFAS and the introduction of the principles of integrated water resources management that I just mentioned will empower this important regional organization to facilitate the efficient and rational use of water and energy resources.

Building sustainable cities and urban settlements is among the priorities mentioned by the Rio+20 outcome document. The UNECE provides effective assistance to its member States in the area of housing and land management. In-depth studies of the housing situation have already been carried out in Azerbaijan, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan with a new study planned for Kazakhstan. Capacity-building projects

focusing on the special needs of Central Asia, as identified by these studies, could be developed and delivered within the SPECA framework if participating countries request this and necessary resources are made available.

The social, economic and environmental benefits of forests were also highlighted during Rio+20. Forests play a key role, among others, in the prevention of desertification and land degradation. Preserving the fragile forests in the catchment areas and deltas of Syr Darya and Amu Darya could contribute to sustainability in the Aral Sea Basin. The UNECE, in cooperation with FAO, is providing expert assistance and capacity building in the area of sustainable forest management. During the coming year, UNECE will be supporting Central Asian countries in developing the role of forests in the green economy.

Rio+20 underlined the importance of energy-efficient multi-modal transport systems. SPECA, through its Project Working Group on Transport is working on developing environmentally sound transportation in the SPECA region. This work also supports road safety – another important Rio+20 issue.

International trade was seen by Rio+20 as “an engine for development and sustained economic growth.” The SPECA Project Working Group on Trade is providing technical assistance to participating countries in the areas of trade facilitation, e-Business and the single window for exports and imports. All of these contribute toward the “universal, rules-based, open, non-discriminatory and equitable multilateral trading system,” which Rio+20 reaffirmed as being of benefit to countries as they advance towards

sustainable development.

The examples mentioned above convincingly demonstrate the potential of the UN Special Programme for the Economies of Central Asia to effectively support efforts by its participating countries to implement the Rio+20 outcomes. To fully develop this potential, SPECA needs additional resources and more active support from other UN agencies and programmes. I see this as a long-term task in the SPECA framework; therefore, I propose to keep this issue on the agenda of the Governing Council. Tomorrow, the discussion by the Governing Council on the “Proposal on further strengthening SPECA” will offer the first opportunity to formulate and agree on steps that would make the Programme an important platform for regional efforts to implement the Rio+20 outcomes.
