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**Statement**

**by**

**Mr. Sven ALKALAJ**

**United Nations Under-Secretary-General**

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

**at**

**the 8<sup>th</sup> session of the SPECA Governing Council**

**Agenda item 7: Report on the work of the Joint ESCAP/UNECE SPECA Office since  
the last session of the Governing Council  
(Bangkok, Thailand, 28 November 2012)**

**Almaty, 22 November 2013**

Mr. Chairperson, Excellences, Ladies and Gentlemen,

Last November, in Bangkok, the 7<sup>th</sup> session of the Governing Council took note of the Proposal on further strengthening SPECA, expressing its conviction that the proposal could substantially increase the relevance and effectiveness of the Programme as well as its ownership by member countries. It welcomed the offer by the Executive Secretaries of ESCAP and UNECE to undertake consultations in the capitals of SPECA member countries on these Proposals during the course of 2013.

Following up on this decision my colleague, Ms. Noeleen Heyzer, the Executive Secretary of UNESCAP, and I visited the capitals of four SPECA countries. We jointly met with representatives of the Government of Kazakhstan on the margins of the Astana Economic Forum and then I undertook official visits to Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan and Turkmenistan. In Astana we were received by H.E. President Nursultan Nazarbayev: in Bishkek I met with H.E. Prime Minister Jantoro Satybaldyev, in Dushanbe I was received by H.E. President Emomali Rahmon and in Ashgabat I was received by H.E. President Gurbanguly Berdimuhamedov. I also met and conducted more detailed discussions with the foreign ministers of Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan and Turkmenistan.

I plan to visit Afghanistan, Azerbaijan and Uzbekistan in the coming months to complete the round of consultations on the Proposal on further strengthening SPECA and to learn in more detail about the needs of these countries and their suggestions for improving regional cooperation in areas covered by the

SPECA mandate.

During our consultations the top-level leaders and high-level decision-makers whom we met underlined the importance of SPECA and its role in strengthening regional cooperation. They supported the main direction of the proposal, namely: more active participation of the Governments of SPECA countries in the management of the Programme; a SPECA that is more responsive to the needs of its participating countries; and a Programme that is implementing more projects in those areas of regional cooperation where they could make the biggest difference.

After concluding the first round of visits I can confidently state that the Proposal on further strengthening SPECA is in line with the needs and suggestions expressed by our counterparts during these consultations. Its adoption and implementation could significantly enhance the effectiveness of Programme.

Let me remind you of the main areas where the proposal foresees further strengthening of SPECA:

The adoption of the Terms of Reference would clearly define the composition and mandate of various bodies under the Programme, including rules of decision-making and the role of National Coordinators. Thus, 15 years after its creation, SPECA would finally be able to operate on the basis of agreed and clearly defined rules.

By encouraging participating countries to provide both financial and in-kind support (conference facilities, interpretation, etc.) to SPECA activities, the proposal would strengthen their ownership of the Programme;

The more active role of SPECA countries in project development and implementation would guarantee that projects implemented in the SPECA framework properly reflect the needs and demands of participating countries. It would also facilitate fundraising by convincing donors that SPECA projects are truly demand-driven.

My recent consultations in SPECA capitals have convincingly demonstrated the importance of regular high-level contacts between the governments of participating countries and the senior management of the two Regional Commissions supporting the Programme, as well as with other UN agencies. Such consultations on the one hand provide authoritative guidance to the Regional Commissions on the needs and priorities of SPECA countries and, on the other hand, offer an opportunity to further strengthen the political will for improving regional cooperation.

A draft decision on the Proposal on further strengthening SPECA was distributed to you and awaits your approval.

I would like to remind all of us that adopting a decision is only the first step towards a more efficient and more relevant Programme. From now on the SPECA countries and the two Regional Commissions need to work actively on the implementation of the decision that you are expected to take. The success of this effort will depend mainly on SPECA participating countries and how effectively they use this improved framework for regional cooperation.

What concrete initial steps are expected from the participating countries?

- a) Well-functioning liaison with the two Regional Commissions.
- b) SPECA countries are encouraged to propose topics to be put on the agenda of the SPECA Economic Forum and issues to be discussed by the Governing Council. In this way their expectations and priorities will be clearly put on the table.
- c) Participating countries are encouraged to present more project proposals to be included in the bi-annual SPECA Work Plan.
- d) The participation of senior decision-makers in SPECA events is an important pre-condition for a meaningful and results-oriented discussion on strategic issues. Ideally, countries should be represented at SPECA events both at the expert level and by policy-makers.

In my view in spite of the limited resources available for project implementation, SPECA has an important niche in regional cooperation. The five Central Asian countries have a number of shared interests and challenges that need to be discussed and resolved among themselves. In addition, strengthened cooperation between Central Asia, Afghanistan and Azerbaijan is of great importance for the sustainable economic development and stability of the broader region. SPECA offers a framework for productive, result-oriented work in these areas.

I look forward to working with all of you on the implementation of concrete steps that will make SPECA a more effective and “user-friendly” framework for promoting regional cooperation among countries participating in the Programme.

