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EUROPE, AT THE FOURTH EXPERT GROUP MEETING
ON DEVELOPING EURO-ASIAN TRANSPORT LINKS**

(Thessaloniki, Greece, 21 – 24 November 2006)

Distinguished delegates, Ladies and Gentlemen,

It is an honour and a pleasure for me to see you again and on behalf of Mr. Capel Ferrer, Director of the UNECE Transport Division and the UNECE delegation to welcome you all to this Fourth Expert Group Meeting on Developing Euro-Asian Transport Links, jointly organized by UNECE and UNESCAP.

First of all, I should like to express our sincere gratitude to the Ministry of Transport and Communications and to the Government of Greece for hosting this Meeting here in this beautiful city of Thessaloniki, which at the same time is one of the most important nodal transport points in South-Eastern Europe.

I should like to thank also Mr. Patsiavos, Head of the International Relations Department of the Ministry, and the other members of the organizational team for their kind support and efforts to organize this event in such excellent conditions.

I should also like to express our gratitude to Thessaloniki Port Authority, Egnatia Odos SA, and Superfast Ferries for arranging and sponsoring a number of side events and technical visits and for offering to all of us a good example of the famous Greek hospitality.

Our thanks are also addressed to you all, for your participation to this event and for your invaluable contribution for the development of this project in the course of the last years, which made the project a great success.

This meeting is the fourth of its kind in the framework of the Euro-Asian component of the UN Development Account Project on Capacity Building for developing Interregional Land and Land-Sea Transport Linkages, which is being jointly implemented by the five Regional Commissions of the UN.

Let me recall that, following a thorough review of the project to better address Euro-Asian transport links, UNECE and UNESCAP in 2003 invited 18 countries in Euro-Asian region to nominate National Focal Points. Similar invitations were also addressed to the World Bank, EBRD and Asian Development Bank, as well as to a number of transport related international organizations and bodies concerned.

Let me also recall that our objective is to develop the national capacity of participating countries and strengthen cooperation among them with a view to the development of integrated and efficient Euro-Asian transport links. We believe this is an indispensable requirement for the economic development of countries in the Euro-Asian region and their integration into the global economy.

In three Expert Group Meetings under the Project held in Almaty and Odessa in 2004, as well as in Istanbul in 2005, you have identified the main Euro-Asian road, rail and inland water transport routes. You have also identified the main transshipment points and agreed to analyze the main physical and non-physical obstacles along the selected routes, including border crossings.

Furthermore, you have agreed on a methodology for the evaluation and prioritization of projects along the selected routes. On the basis of this methodology, evaluation and prioritization of projects has been elaborated by Professor Tsamboulas. You have also provided Geographic Information System (GIS) data on the selected routes, which has allowed the development of a GIS database.

Since the last meeting in Istanbul, the work on the evaluation and prioritization of projects has been completed. The first analysis of main physical and non-physical obstacles along the selected routes, including border crossings is ongoing. The collection and processing of a huge volume of GIS data and maps has been materialized and a set of important GIS maps has become available to the participating countries.

Moreover, thanks to your inputs, the elaboration of a UNECE-UNESCAP in-house study on the development of Euro-Asian is almost finalized and soon its important conclusions and recommendations will become available, enabling further consideration and appropriate actions by those concerned.

In addition, two national workshops on the facilitation of international transport along the Euro-Asian transport links were jointly organized under the Project by UNECE and UNESCAP and kindly hosted by the Governments of Azerbaijan and Georgia, in May 2006 in Baku and Tbilisi, respectively.

The aim of these workshops was to assist Azerbaijan and Georgia in developing favourable transit environment for facilitating international transport and trade along the Euro-Asian transport links, support ongoing national efforts to accede to and implement relevant UNECE agreements and conventions, as well as to foster cooperation amongst major national stakeholders involved in transit and border crossing operations.

Each workshop was attended by over 40 representatives from public and private sector from those countries, including from the Ministries of Transport, Foreign Affairs, Finance, and Interior, Customs, Ports, Transport Associations and Companies, as well as from Chambers of Commerce, Businesses, aid and research institutions. Similar workshops are foreseen in Armenia, Belarus, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, the Republic of Moldova, Iran, and Ukraine.

In order to enable the organization of these workshops and the smooth completion of the remaining activities of the Project, UNECE and ESCAP, together with the other UN

regional, are trying to ensure the UN Head Quarters approval for the prolongation of the project till June 2007. We have good reasons to believe that this request will be met.

Nevertheless, the project will then come into an end, and with it its useful results and the momentum created, whilst much cooperation is still needed and for long time.

At its 68th session held in Geneva in February 2006, the UNECE ITC following the recommendation of its Working Group on Transport Trends and Economics (WP.5), requested the UNECE secretariat to prepare jointly with UNESCAP a proposal for the continuation of the project in a new phase beyond 2006, to make every effort in order to raise funds from potential donors for its implementation, and to apply the most appropriate framework in order to ensure that the Expert Group established under the UNECE-UNESCAP joint project on Euro-Asian transport links, becomes functional as a permanent mechanism ensuring continued monitoring of relevant activities.

At its 11th session, held in Almaty, in March 2006, the SPECA Working Group of Transport and Border Crossing Facilitation expressed similar requests. A number of international fora have recognized the importance of the continuation of the UNECE-UNESCAP work on developing Euro-Asian transport links, including the ECMT Council of Ministers held in Moscow in May 2005, and the First Meeting of the EU-Black Sea-Caspian Basin Expert Working Group on Transport Infrastructure, held in Kiev in December 2005.

In view of the above, the UNECE and UNESCAP prepared a proposal for the continuation of this project in a new Phase II to be implemented over the period 2007-2010. The UNECE secretariat submitted this proposal to the 14th OSCE Economic Forum, held on 22-24 of May 2006 in Prague, for possible funding. The proposal was well received by the 55 OSCE Member States and we hope that soon will hear positive results.

At the 4th EGM, we will discuss all these issues. We will also discuss the results of the work done, share best practices and lessons learned and decide on further actions and recommendations on the ways to proceed in future.

Distinguished delegates, Ladies and Gentlemen,

Without any doubt, our Project has so far achieved tangible results. This is mainly thanks to your willingness to cooperate. However, there is no room for complacency. This is a long-term undertaking, which requires a great deal of effort and perseverance. It also requires some financial support. The support of the IFIs and other international organizations and your own support will be very important.

The road is long. The challenges are difficult. But I am persuaded that with your cooperation and support, we will achieve the objective of a sound development of the Euro-Asian land transport links for the benefit, not only of the countries concerned, but also of all European and Asian countries.

I wish every success to this meeting and thank you for your attention.