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UNITED NATIONS ECONOMIC COMMISSION FOR EUROPE,
AT THE 13th SESSION OF SPECA PROJECT WORKING GROUP
ON TRANSPORT AND BORDER CROSSING FACILITATION**

(Almaty, Kazakhstan, 12-13 March 2008)

**Dear Minister, Distinguished delegates,
Ladies and Gentlemen,**

It is an honor and a pleasure for me, on behalf of Mr. Marek Belka, Executive Secretary of UNECE, and Mrs. Eva Molnar, Director of Transport Division, to address this 13th session of the SPECA Project Working Group on Transport and Border Crossing Facilitation and to convey.

I should also like on their behalf to express our sincere gratitude to the Government of the Republic of Kazakhstan for hosting this meeting in Almaty, and for its continuing support to the SPECA Programme.

As every one in this room knows, transport is a basic and most strategic factor for economic development in every country. Transport is an essential part of all economic processes, including, production, distribution and trade. At the same time, national economies increasingly depend on international trade, exports and imports, which require international transport. In view of the globalization of economies and trade, an efficient international transport is more important than ever before for the development of countries.

However, international transport is hampered by many obstacles. Low standard infrastructures, bottlenecks and missing

links, as well as long delays at borders are some of these obstacles. Transport also raises serious safety, security and environmental concerns.

The SPECA Project Working Group on Transport and Border Crossing Facilitation has addressed some of these problems. I am pleased to note that since the 12 session of the group, accession to UNECE international agreements in the field of transport has increased. Thanks to the work done by the Research Institute on Transport, which offers technical support on SPECA issues to the Ministry of Transport of Kazakhstan, progress has been achieved in a number of areas. Formulation of project proposals of interest to SPECA countries, development of SPECA database, preparatory work on the publication of road wayside, are some of these achievements.

Progress has been made also, through bilateral consultations on border crossing problems amongst neighboring countries initiated by the group, establishment or strengthening of national transport and trade facilitation mechanisms, demonstration runs of block-trains, and the implementation of a number of tasks identified in the Almaty Action Plan. These efforts should be continued and further intensified.

The implementation of the joint UNECE-UNESCAP Project on developing Euro-Asian transport links, including through SPECA region, has produced tangible results. These include, the identification of main Euro-Asian transport routes, analysis of the main physical and non-physical obstacles along the routes, evaluation and prioritization of infrastructure projects, collection and processing of a large volume of data, creation of a GIS database, organization of a number of interregional meetings and capacity building workshops. These results are presented in the recently published joint ECE-ESCAP study.

The development of this project has been a unique undertaking. It has been made possible thanks to the commitment, skills, and determination of designated national focal points from

the countries in the Euro-Asian region. I take this opportunity to thank once more all those who contributed to successful outcomes of the joint UNECE-UNESCAP project.

Such outcomes, however, cannot be taken for granted. Development of Euro-Asian transport links would be a long-term process that requires first and foremost strong political will and commitment of the countries concerned as well as careful use of scarce financial resources.

The first day of the 70th session of the UNECE Inland Transport Committee, held in Geneva on 19 February 2008, was marked by the Meeting of Ministers of Transport of countries in the Euro-Asian region. With a view to ensure the political commitment necessary for the continuation of the Euro-Asian transport linkages project, Ministers from ECE and ESCAP Member States participating in the project reaffirmed their support and commitment, while endorsing the EATL links selected, the priority infrastructure investments identified and supported the establishment of a mechanism for monitoring the follow-up activities.

At this magic day and room in Geneva, as it was characterized by the Suisse delegate to the Inland Transport Committee, we had the honor and pleasure to receive 300 high-level representatives from 41 countries and more than 20 international organizations, among which 12 Ministers and other high officials from 18 ECE and ESCA member States involved in the project. On this occasion Ministers signed a Joint Statement on future development of the Euro-Asian Transport Linkages.

I should like to use this opportunity to thank Mr. Dulat KUTERBEKOV, Vice-Minister of Transport and Communications of Kazakhstan, as well as Minister Mr. MAMEDOV, Azerbaijan, Minister JAWID, Afghanistan, Minister ABDUVALIEV, Uzbekistan and other high-officials of SPECA countries for their active participation in the Ministerial Meeting and their continued support extended to us in the course of the last five years.

However, in spite the progress achieved, there are still many problems. Transport infrastructure remains inadequate. There are bottlenecks and missing links, and lack of funds to remove them. Central Asia still experiences the consequences of decades of neglect and under-investment in the area of transport infrastructure.

Furthermore, although the majority of SPECA countries have acceded the most important UNECE transport facilitation and road safety conventions, the available data indicate that relatively high level of traffic fatalities and significant border-crossing delays persist throughout the region. Often vehicles have to wait at borders for hours and even days.

A great variety of safety hazards and environmental impacts, including the still widespread use of old, unsafe and highly polluting vehicles, are also actual or potential barriers to transport in SPECA region. The solution of these problems requires a lot of efforts, and indeed the coordinated action of the Governments concerned.

A number of these issues will be further addressed under the Phase II of the Euro-Asian transport linkages project to be implemented by ECE and ESCAP from 2008 to 2011. The UNECE Inland Transport Committee approved the creation of the Expert Group on Euro-Asian transport links, based on the ECE-ESCAP Expert Group that worked successfully in the course of the last five years, which will steer the continuation of this joint endeavor.

Very soon we will be in the position to make further announcements about the implementation procedures of the project's Phase II, following the positive response from the donor community to our request for ensuring the necessary funding for its continuation.

Another issue of great concern is that of the road traffic safety. It is well known that road traffic crashes claim the lives of

more than 1.2 million people every year throughout the world and are responsible for about 40 million injuries. Statistics show that SPECA countries are among those who pay a severe penalty in road accidents every year. Improving Global Road Safety by setting regional and national road traffic casualty reduction targets will be another UNDA funded project to be implemented by the five UN regional commissions in the course of 2008-2009.

This new project represents a continuation of efforts to implement the recommendations made in General Assembly resolution A/RES/60/5 on improving global road safety. The overarching objective of the project is to assist low and middle income countries to develop regional and national road traffic casualty reduction targets and to provide them with examples of good road safety practice that could help them to achieve the targets selected by 2015. SPECA countries will be among the beneficiaries of the project.

Dear Minister, Ladies and Gentlemen,

SPECA Working Group on Transport and Border Crossing Facilitation represents an important element for the promotion of intercountry cooperation and for the improvement of the transport systems in the region. The work of the SPECA Project Working Group on Border Crossing Facilitation is recognized as very important for the achievement of an efficient and well balanced, safe and sustainable transport system in the Central Asia region.

The UNECE, in close cooperation with ESCAP and other international organizations and institutions, is constantly supporting the activities of the SPECA project and will continue doing so in the years ahead. During the course of the meeting, we will have the opportunity to discuss with you how best our work can be more focused, useful and productive.

I wish you every success in your work and thank you for your attention.