

CHECK AGAINST DELIVERY

Statement

by

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At the

**Side event: Sustainability of transport and trade connectivity in the Caspian Sea
region in the age of pandemics**

24 February 2021

Virtual meeting, 1.15 - 2.45 p.m.

Excellencies,

Ladies and Gentlemen,

It is a great pleasure for me to open the discussion of this important side event on “Sustainability of transport and trade connectivity in the Caspian Sea region in the age of pandemics” co-organized by the Permanent Mission of Turkmenistan, the UN Office of the High Representative for the Least Developed Countries, Landlocked Developing Countries and Small Island Developing States and UNECE.

At the outset, let me, Your Excellency, congratulate you on Turkmenistan’s 30th Anniversary.

I would like to take the opportunity to share some reflections on the two central underlying themes of this side-event: finding solutions to the immense disruption caused by the pandemic and the obstacles to development caused by landlocked-ness. Both challenges, despite their different characteristics, hamper the implementation of the SDGs. So, addressing them is critical.

First, on the pandemic front, let me start with the obvious conclusion: it will inevitably complicate the implementation of the SDGs. Indeed, last year brought with it challenges unseen at times of peace. It is not a coincidence that in 2020, the world has seen the first increase in global poverty in decades, with more than 70 million people pushed into extreme poverty according to the 2020 SDGs report.

This is an important setback but one that has also generated immense initiative and creativity to tackle it. True, the pandemic exposed weaknesses in our inland transport systems: It disrupted the supply chains that link economic activity worldwide and bridge national borders. But in 2021, we stand united and ready to discuss and take decisions that will shape the future and help revive the implementation of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, with transport and connectivity playing a critical role for the achievement of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).

The pandemic is a recent challenge and one that hopefully will remain a short-lived one, with the help of human ingenuity but also successful, high-impact intergovernmental cooperation. I am proud to see UNECE become a catalyst for solutions on this critical front, through the 83rd annual session of the ITC and the inspiring Ministerial Resolution that Heads of Delegations endorsed yesterday. Indeed, in this critical time, the ITC has risen to the challenge and is performing its role as the UN Platform for inland transport to the fullest extent! We are collectively rising to the challenge, together: to tackle not only this but also the next pandemic or emergency of cross-border nature.

Let me now turn to a challenge whose nature is, of course, less transitory – the special circumstances of landlocked countries. The Euro-Asian region hosts about 1/3 of the world's landlocked countries, including some of the largest landlocked countries (in terms of geographical area) as well as some of those that face the longest geographical distances to the open sea.

Of course, the Caspian Sea region has a tremendous economic and transit potential for inland transport operations between Europe and Asia. Yet it remains a landlocked region and the Caspian Sea, a

landlocked sea. At the UNECE we take very seriously the challenges that landlocked countries face in integrating into the global economy. Our response is a broad range of legal instruments designed to facilitate transport and transit.

UNECE is the custodian of 59 legal instruments and an increasingly global centre of UN inland transport conventions and agreements. The total number of contracting parties to these legal instruments today is 1,801. Of the 193 UN Member States, 150 (78 per cent!) are contracting parties to at least one of these legal instruments.

One of these legal instruments is the famous TIR Convention, which is crucially important for countries in our region to facilitate transit transport. The eTIR will open new applications for the TIR system to make cross-border and transit transport more efficient and more resilient. This long-awaited revolution of the TIR system, debated among UNECE member States for over 20 years, will not only provide a facilitated procedure for transport companies, but also further secure the TIR system for the benefit of all customs administrations that use it.

In addition to such facilitation tools, we focus on harmonization of technical and regulatory standards, prioritization of infrastructure networks, development of corridors, capacity building, and cooperation between LLDCs and transit countries.

When it comes to capacity-building, one of our flagship initiatives in the field of infrastructure connectivity is the Euro-Asian Transport Links project (EATL).

The EATL Project was launched in 2002. Since then, it has made Euro-Asian transport a reality. Over the years, it has gathered public and private sector stakeholders from over 38 countries in Europe and Asia, including many EU member States, landlocked countries in Central Asia and the South Caucasus, as well as non-UNECE countries in Asia such as Afghanistan, China, India, Mongolia and Pakistan.

Another current UNECE-led initiative of direct interest is the creation of a Unified Railway Law. Once in place, it will enable railway operators to carry out their activity within a single legal regime along the entire East-West axis, connecting markets in Europe and Asia.

Excellencies,

Ladies and Gentlemen,

The focus of this side event is a very timely one. The challenges are formidable. But so is our resolve to address them. The region is undergoing a significant transformation, but there is still a lot of work to be done to untap the economic and trade potential of the Euro-Asian space. More efforts are needed and coordinated actions are required.

UNECE stands ready to continue providing our membership with the tools and instruments to do just that. Let us work all together to make a more effectively and efficiently connected Euro-Asian region a reality!

Thank you.