

**ESCAP'S STATEMENT DURING THE SEVENTH SESSION OF THE MEETING OF THE PARTIES TO
THE CONVENTION ON ACCESS TO INFORMATION, PUBLIC PARTICIPATION IN DECISION-
MAKING AND ACCESS TO JUSTICE IN ENVIRONMENTAL MATTERS (AARHUS CONVENTION)**
(20th Anniversary since the entry into force of the Aarhus Convention)

**Agenda item 8 (d) on global and regional developments on issues related to Principle 10 of
the Rio Declaration**

Wednesday, 20 October 2021, 12.10-12.30 Geneva time

DELIVERED BY DR. KATINKA WEINBERGER
(5 mins)

Excellencies,

Distinguished delegates and Honorable participants,

All courtesies observed,

- On behalf of ESCAP, I would like to thank the Secretariat of the Aarhus Convention for the invitation to speak at this very important meeting. We congratulate all Parties and signatories to the Convention, who have demonstrated their commitment to procedural environmental rights enshrined in Principle 10 of the Rio Declaration for twenty years already.
- At ESCAP, we understand and value the correlation between the protection of the environment, including through procedural access rights, as well as the success of the entire 2030 Agenda. There is good evidence that the provision of environmental rights is linked to better environmental outcomes. The recognition and protection of environmental rights are also linked to faster improvements in environmental quality. Strengthening key rights such as **access to information, access to justice and public participation in environmental decision-making** can be an opportunity to accelerate action and to increase environmental performance in the region.
- The current reality in our region reminds us, we cannot delay this process any longer. Between 2015 and 2019, at least 472 human rights defenders, journalists and trade unionists were killed and 21 forcibly disappeared in 24 countries across Asia and the

Pacific. Defenders of environmental rights are particularly at risk; they are subject to harassment, arbitrary arrests, detentions, threats, and killing. Last year, 41 land and environmental defenders were killed in Asia and the Pacific.

- We observe fundamental challenges in the region that hinder environmental protection and sustainable development. These include Gender imbalances that persist in political participation, a declining space for civil society participation, inequality, and vulnerability; in some countries, there are obstructed and narrowed and repressed civil spaces.
- Since the outbreak of COVID-19 and subsequent lockdowns, restrictions on civic space and fundamental freedoms more broadly have continued to tighten since 2020. Of 25 Asian countries assessed, four were rated as closed, nine as repressed and nine as obstructed. The COVID-19 crisis has also exposed underlying issues of exclusion, racism and xenophobia in many countries, but national human rights institutions have played a proactive role in monitoring and advocacy, particularly on the rights of minorities.
- Against this backdrop, we are intensifying our work to accelerate progress in the region and achieve real transformation. We need an empowered, inclusive and equal Asia-Pacific. We are currently working closely with the Association of Southeast Asian Nations, namely, the ASEAN Intergovernmental Commission on Human Rights (AICHR), to draw the roadmap towards the development of a regional/subregional instrument on access rights as they relate to environmental matters/ for environmental decision making.
- We are building on the experience and expertise of our sibling regional commissions, UNECE and ECLAC, who have paved the road and shared many lessons on the effective safeguarding of environmental rights. The Aarhus Convention is, to date, the global benchmark. Asia-Pacific continues to learn from the more recent Escazú Agreement and its inception strategies. We appreciate the support from colleagues in their respective Secretariats, who encourage and envisage a similar future for access rights in Asia and the Pacific.

- In this regard, I would like to express appreciation to the **Government of Sweden** for their genuine support for the work we are conducting in Asia and the Pacific on the promotion of Access rights. Through their international cooperation agency in Asia, we have been able to make progress with grassroots organizations, environmental defenders and intergovernmental bodies to work towards the development and harmonization of access rights.
- Our efforts and progress in the region have materialized through close cooperation with partner UN agencies. We have developed a partnership with UNEP's and OHCHR's regional offices in Asia-Pacific to support member States and civil society together as a ONE-UN family.
- A regional legally binding instrument on access rights in Asia-Pacific could be an enabler to building back better, as we make gradual progress in recovery, with more access to information, justice and participation, within the overarching goals of the 2030 Agenda.
- Excellencies, colleagues, Congratulations on the 20th Anniversary of the entry into force of the Aarhus convention. We look forward to building on your success and making our regional contribution to the global realization of Principle 10. Thank you!