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**Statement**

**by**

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**United Nations Under-Secretary-General**

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**at**

**Pan-European Regional Preparatory Meeting  
for the United Nations 2023 Water Conference**

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**Geneva, Palais des Nations, Salle XVIII, and online**

**Statement to be delivered virtually**

Excellencies, Ladies and Gentlemen,

Water-related challenges persist throughout the UNECE region.

19 million people still do not have access to improved water sources and 67 million people lack access to improved sanitation facilities.

Diffuse pollution and wastewater discharges remain significant despite progress achieved with the help of the EU Water Framework Directive and other EU directives. Persistent organic pollutants are of great public health concern. Source-to-sea pollution is an urgent problem in most marine regions, such as plastics in the Mediterranean.

Freshwater ecosystems are threatened, including by flow alteration from dams, embankment, etc.

Overuse, especially of groundwater, is a growing challenge in many sub-regions.

Transboundary cooperation continues to be challenging, especially but not only, on aquifers and in many basins in South-Eastern Europe, the Caucasus and Central Asia.

We are in troubled times for peace, the global economy and the environment. Since the beginning of the war in Ukraine, multiple cities and infrastructure facilities have been destroyed, including water facilities, depriving hundreds of thousands of people of the right to water and sanitation. This is all the more worrying since, according to WHO, the Covid-19 pandemic is far from over.

I am very concerned that the negative economic impacts of the conflict in Ukraine and the shrinking policy space in our region will have detrimental consequences on the implementation of the entire 2030 Agenda.

Peace must be restored. There cannot be sustainable development without peace, and peace will not be assured without sustainable development. I hope that diplomatic negotiations will very soon put an end to this conflict.

We are also already witnessing the brutal impacts of extreme weather events being more frequent and severe due to climate change. Last year floods in Western Europe and drought in Central Asia have costed our region billions: only in Germany, the cost of the floods was estimated to be \$40 billion. However, financing of water-related climate projects has been limited, especially in certain parts of our region, and setting up bankable projects remains a challenge.

Nevertheless, new solutions are emerging. The SDG 6 Global Acceleration Framework plays an important role. But what regional good practices can we draw upon to accelerate progress towards SDG6?

Firstly, transboundary cooperation is crucial. Shared basins are home to more than 50 per cent of population in our region. Effective transboundary water cooperation is therefore a requirement, not only for achieving SDG6 but also other SDGs, including on health, food, and energy.

The Convention on the Protection and Use of Transboundary Watercourses and International Lakes, known as the Water Convention, which UNECE has the honour to service, is a powerful global instrument to advance cooperation. Since the Convention's adoption in 1992, thanks to it, more than 90 agreements on shared waters have been put in place in our region. These have brought many benefits to our region in terms of sustainable development, regional integration and conflict prevention. I therefore invite all countries which have not yet done so to accede to the Water Convention.

Secondly, to accelerate progress, we need increased intersectoral cooperation. We need to look at interlinkages and trade-offs between resource use, in particular water, food, energy and ecosystem. By applying an integrated, nexus

approach, countries can decrease resource use and increase circular economy efficiency.

Thirdly, climate change impacts on our health and the COVID-19 pandemic remind us that access to safe and sufficient water, adequate sanitation and hygiene save lives. The Protocol on Water and Health, jointly serviced by UNECE and WHO-Europe, provides a practical tool for translating into action the human rights to water and sanitation. Its progressive target setting on water, sanitation, hygiene and health and the national reporting are mechanisms to accelerate progress. I call upon countries to accede to and implement the Protocol.

Our region is known for many other tools to accelerate progress. These include the different EU policies and legislation, the Environmental Performance Reviews, People-first Public-Private Partnerships, the National Policy Dialogues on water, and many others.

These and other good practices will be discussed in the coming days. We will hear the voices of women, youth and other stakeholder representatives at this meeting – and we will work together, in the spirit of the Aarhus Convention, another landmark instrument born in our region.

I encourage you to bring our voice and good practices to New York. Regional priorities, including circular economy and transboundary cooperation, should become our important input to the 2023 Water Conference.

Thank you.