

*Dear Chair, distinguished colleagues,*

*first of all let me to express my congratulations to Mr. Michel Forst for taking responsibility as Special reporter on Environmental Defenders.*

*As it is known, Armenia was one of the first countries to join the Aarhus Convention. Armenia joined the Aarhus Convention in 1998 and ensures compliance with its commitments. The first Aarhus Center was opened in Yerevan and has been operating under the Ministry since its establishment, being a platform for public-government cooperation.*

*Of course we have slowed down some processes as a result of the 2020 Nagorno Karabakh war, but RA is making grant efforts to restart with new forces and continue to implement and fulfil the commitments.*

*I would like to stress the importance of the role of environmental defenders based on the experience of Armenia.*

*The role of environmental activists is crucial for both the environment and wildlife protection. But it should be noted that it can be possible through the adequate approach of the Government.*

*For instance, years ago, the construction of a highway was planned through "Shikahogh" State Reserve in Syunik region. Due to the resistance of the activists, the Government revised the project, and the road was built by an alternative route.*

*Another example is that the decision to build a small HPP using the water of natural monument Trchkan waterfall was changed. Again owing to the environmental activists the Government reconsidered the decision.*

*There are a number of examples that show the readiness of the Government to collaborate.*

*Of course, our approaches are not always the same. We appreciate the work of activists, we work closely with them. We organize roundtable discussions trying to reach a consensus.*

*For example, we are closely cooperating in the process of drafting the EIA law at the moment. I personally conducted 4 public discussions, a number of working discussions.*

*We are currently cooperating with the OSCE to reactivate the work of the local Aarhus centers. In this regard, the Government, as well as regional/local governing bodies also expressed their support mentioning the importance of public awareness and mobilization, involvement in decision-making at the local level.*

*By the way, a number of public initiatives were born thanks to the centers, due to the increase of the both eco-educational level and consciousness of ecological rights of the society. I would like to emphasize that the centers operated through memorandums signed between the*

*Government of RA and the OSCE office in Yerevan, and they always had support by the Government.*

*The Ministry of Environment of Armenia actively disseminates information related to the environment, creating basis for public involvement at an early stage.*

*As for the information related to the activities of the Ministry of Environment, the Minister and Deputy Ministers, it is disseminated through the official website of the Ministry, and pages on social network.*

*The monitoring shows that since the beginning of 2022, Ministry of Environment has been mentioned in the media over 4000 times and 21000 times in social media as a source of information.*

*Thus any information on environmental matters is immediately disseminated and environmental activists have an opportunity for immediate reporting about their views: consent or disagreement concerning the issue. This is a very productive tool in terms of identifying problems and reacting quickly.*

*Therefore, we welcome the efforts of the Secretariat and partners to pay more attention to the protection of the interests of environmental activists, which will naturally serve our common goal - the protection of nature and human health.*

Ms. Gayane Gabrielyan

Deputy Minister of Environment of RA