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Meeting of the Parties to the Convention on the Protection and Use of Transboundary Watercourses and International Lakes

Ninth session

Geneva, 29 September–1 October 2021

Report of the Meeting of the Parties on its ninth session

Addendum

Chair's summary of the high-level special session on water and peace

I. Introduction

1. The special session on water and peace, moderated by Mr. Danilo Türk (Chair of the Global High-Level Panel on Water and Peace, former President of Slovenia) focused on the role of transboundary water cooperation as a catalyst for peace and the ways to accelerate progress on transboundary water cooperation to achieve sustainable development. The special session included three panel discussions, each followed by high-level interventions from the floor.

II. Transboundary water cooperation: a catalyst for peace

A. Transboundary water cooperation as a key for regional peace and stability (panel discussion 1)

2. Strong linkages between water, climate change and peace were emphasized by many participants, including Mr. Pekka Haavisto (Minister for Foreign Affairs of Finland), Mr. Mahdi Rashid Al-Hamdani (Minister for Water Resources of Iraq), Ms. Anita Pipan (Ambassador Extraordinary and Plenipotentiary, Permanent Representative, Permanent Mission of Slovenia to the United Nations Office and other international organizations in Geneva), speaking on behalf of the European Union and its member States, Mr. Mazen Ghunaim (Minister for Water; Head of the Palestinian Water Authority of the State of Palestine) and Ms. Hristina Odjaklieska (Deputy Minister for Environment and Physical Planning of North Macedonia). Mr. Abderahim Birémé Hamid (Executive Secretary, Niger Basin Authority) also emphasized health and ecosystems as additional dimensions of the nexus. Many participants in the following panels also pointed out those linkages.

3. Several speakers stated that extreme events and growing scarcity could undermine sustainable development, as well as drive instability and migration, especially in already fragile contexts. Specific examples were highlighted by Mr. Taofeq Al-Sharjabi (Minister for

Water and Environment of Yemen), who urged that water infrastructure not be targeted in armed conflicts, and Mr. Ghunaim, who emphasized linkages between water security and national security.

4. Many speakers stressed that, at the same time, transboundary water cooperation could support trust, peacebuilding and regional integration. Mr. Serigne Mbaye Thiam (Minister for Water and Sanitation of Senegal) described the emergence and evolution of transboundary water cooperation in the Senegal River basin, which had contributed to peace, trust and regional development. Mr. Hamid emphasized the contribution of the Water Charter of the Niger Basin and the Niger Basin Authority to peace and regional development.

5. Many participants underlined the key role of joint bodies for transboundary water cooperation, such as river basin organizations and bilateral commissions, in promoting peace, security and development and achieving mutual benefits for participating countries. Ms. Pipan pointed to the examples of the International Sava River Basin Commission and the Lake Chad Basin Commission, which had been established in post-war regions and had contributed greatly to peace, security and sustainable development in their regions. Mr. Adamou Mahaman (Minister for Hydraulics and Sanitation of Niger) described the role of the Lake Chad Basin Commission and the Niger Basin Authority in promoting security and development. Mr. Thiam shared the experience of the Organization for the Development of the Senegal River in promoting peace and development in the Senegal River basin along three axes: hydropower, irrigation and navigation.

6. The role of water diplomacy in making water a tool for peace was highlighted by Ms. Pipan, who emphasized the intention of the European Union to increase diplomatic engagement on water as a tool for peace, security and stability, and for enhancing the resilience of society and economies. She also called upon the United Nations to play a more prominent role in leading cooperation on water issues and to advance the water and peace agenda.

7. Several speakers highlighted that the Convention on the Protection and Use of Transboundary Watercourses and International Lakes (Water Convention) offered an essential intergovernmental platform and a forum in the United Nations system for dealing with transboundary water issues. Among its strengths were the provision of useful tools and consolidation of good practices and expertise. Mr. Jüri Ratas (President of the parliament of Estonia) called upon countries sharing transboundary basins to define and assess the benefits of transboundary water cooperation using the tools developed under the Convention as a way to build a relationship of mutual trust and support.

8. Concrete examples of the benefits of cooperation on the basis of the Water Convention were highlighted, demonstrating the proven effectiveness of the Convention to be built upon to accelerate progress on transboundary water cooperation worldwide. Those examples included cooperation between Finland and the Russian Federation, cooperation between Estonia and the Russian Federation on Lake Peipsi and cooperation in the Drin River basin and on Lake Ohrid and Lake Prespa. Many other examples were provided by participants in other panels, for example, cooperation on the River Rhine, cooperation in the framework of the Interstate Commission for Water Coordination in Central Asia, cooperation of the Russian Federation through nine bilateral agreements, and cooperation on the Dniester River.

9. Several countries in the process of acceding to the Convention and Slovenia, speaking on behalf of the European Union and its member States, stressed that the globalization of the Water Convention offered many benefits, including in the areas of peace, dispute prevention and regional integration. According to Mr. Carl Hermann Gustav Schlettwein (Minister for Agriculture, Water and Land Reform of Namibia), by acceding to the Water Convention, Namibia hoped to strengthen its capacity and use additional tools in catalyzing change towards the water and peace nexus, as well gain new insights for enhanced transboundary cooperation, conflict prevention and regional stability. According to Mr. Al-Hamdani, Iraq, which was in the final stage of the accession process, looked forward to gaining better legal frameworks for cooperation through joining the Water Convention. A statement, delivered on behalf of Mr. Suleiman H. Adamu (Minister for Water Resources of Nigeria), expressed the commitment of Nigeria to accede to the Water Convention and contained information on actions taken as a part of the accession process. Mr. Honoré Sayi (Minister for Energy and

Hydraulics of the Congo) described his country's efforts to join the Water Convention and the steps undertaken following the expression of interest at the eighth session of the Meeting of the Parties (Nur-Sultan, 10–12 October 2018).¹ Mr. Hamid emphasized that regional organizations could support countries in accession processes, but underscored that the political will to cooperate was essential to improve transboundary water cooperation and progress towards accession to the Convention.

B. The role of the Water Convention in fostering peace (panel discussion 2)

10. Stating that the Water Convention was a vital instrument for managing and developing transboundary waters in peace, Ms. Cecilia Abena Dapaah (Minister for Sanitation and Water Resources of Ghana) was echoed by practically all the participants in the subsequent discussion. Ms. Barbara Visser (Minister for Infrastructure and Water Management of the Netherlands), echoed by several other speakers, stressed that the Water Convention was a strong instrument to help the world achieve the water-related Sustainable Development Goals and to support global action on adaptation to climate change.

11. Subsequent discussions focused on how the Convention implemented its conflict prevention function and what could be done to enhance it, including in the context of the Convention's globalization. Mr. Aleksandar Stijović (Minister for Agriculture, Forestry and Water Management of Montenegro) focused on the role of transboundary water agreements and projects developed as part of the implementation of the Water Convention. Mr. Ibrahim Alio Abdoulaye (Minister for Urban and Rural Hydraulics of Chad) demonstrated how joint institutions helped to develop peaceful cooperation on transboundary river, lake and aquifer basins. Ms. Dapaah emphasized that the accession of Ghana to the Water Convention and the Convention on the Law of the Non-navigational Uses of International Watercourses in 2020 had already effectively led to the stepping up of the application of provisions to promote data exchange and information-sharing, especially on water and effluent discharges and planned measures/developments, with riparian countries.

12. Several speakers emphasized the supportive role played by the Convention's institutional platform to facilitate implementation of the Convention and conflict prevention. Ms. Dapaah expressed appreciation for the fact that the Convention's institutional framework provided support to the implementation of obligations. She stressed that Ghana had developed an implementation plan for the Water Convention and called on technical and financial partners to support the Government's efforts. Mr. Shavkat Khamraev (Minister for Water Resources of Uzbekistan) said that he appreciated that the Water Convention supported national action and implementation of regional projects. According to him, the Water Convention had affirmed itself as a global instrument that worked in support of regional mechanisms.

13. One part of the Convention's institutional platform was the Implementation Committee, entrusted with facilitating and promoting the implementation and application of and compliance with the Convention. Mr. Attila Tanzi (Chair, Implementation Committee of the Water Convention) explained that, while all functions and procedures of the Committee could contribute to conflict prevention, its conflict prevention role was epitomized by the advisory procedure. That procedure allowed a Party, or Parties jointly, to request advice from the Committee about efforts to implement or apply the Convention vis-à-vis each other, other Parties or non-Parties. The advisory procedure had recently been successfully applied by Albania and Montenegro, which had benefited from the Committee's legal and technical advice.

14. Taking into account the role of the Water Convention in conflict prevention and fostering peace and development, several speakers called upon their neighbouring riparians to accede to the Convention. Mr. Khamraev urged all countries of Central Asia to join the Convention. Ms. Dapaah called upon all countries in the Volta River basin to accede, congratulating Togo on its recent accession. Mr. Abdoulaye called upon other riparian

¹ ECE/MP.WAT/54, para. 35.

countries in the Niger River basin, the Lake Chad basin and the Nubian Sandstone Aquifer system to accede to the Water Convention.

15. Among the strengths of the Convention were its capacity to be a pioneer in addressing emerging issues and the provision of useful tools through triennial programmes of work. Mr. Khamraev expressed appreciation for the fact that the new programme of work 2022–2024 supported progressive ideas and innovative cooperation, underlining the relevance of the programme area on financing of cooperation for his country and Central Asia. In a statement delivered on behalf of Ms. Margit Szűcs (Ambassador Extraordinary and Plenipotentiary, Permanent Representative, Permanent Mission of Hungary to the United Nations Office and other international organizations in Geneva), it was stressed that the activities foreseen in the next programme of work would contribute to peaceful cooperation between and among nations, highlighting that the tools developed during the past triennium, such as the *Handbook on Water Allocation in a Transboundary Context* (ECE/MP.WAT/64) and the *Practical Guide for the Development of Agreements or Other Arrangements for Transboundary Water Cooperation* (ECE/MP.WAT/68), were to be used to settle ongoing disputes or prevent conflicts. The representatives of the European Union, France, Hungary and the Netherlands stressed their commitment to continue supporting the programmes of work of the Convention in the future.

16. Many participants highlighted that transboundary water cooperation and management were critical to advancing governance and management of water resources for sustainable and equitable development and supporting delivery of the water-related 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development and that the Water Convention had a crucial role to play there. However, political will was indispensable if progress were to be achieved. Mr. Alain-Richard Ahipaud Donwahi (Minister for Water and Forests of Côte d'Ivoire) called for more cooperation among States globally and regionally. Ms. Emmanuelle Lachaussée (Deputy Permanent Representative, speaking on behalf of Mr. Jérôme Bonnafont, Ambassador, Permanent Representative, Permanent Mission of France to the United Nations Office and other international organizations in Geneva) encouraged the display of political will, which was a prerequisite for managing transboundary waters properly.

C. Signing ceremony of the Ministerial Declaration on the Senegalo-Mauritanian Aquifer Basin

17. The special session included a historic moment in the form of the signing of the Ministerial Declaration on the Senegalo-Mauritanian Aquifer Basin by the ministers in charge of water of the Gambia, Guinea-Bissau, Mauritania and Senegal. The ministers committed to establishing a legal and institutional framework for transboundary cooperation for the sustainable management of the waters of the Senegal-Mauritanian Aquifer basin, in conjunction with the surface waters of the region, and decided to launch a negotiation process to define that legal and institutional framework. That step followed a process in the framework of the Regional Working Group for Transboundary Cooperation on the Senegal-Mauritanian Aquifer Basin, with the participation of the Organization for the Development of the Senegal River and the Gambia River Basin Development Organization and with the support of the secretariat of the Water Convention, the Geneva Water Hub and the International Groundwater Resources Assessment Centre.

18. The process followed a request from Senegal made upon accession to the Water Convention to assist Senegal and its neighbours in establishing legal frameworks for cooperation on the aquifer. It therefore demonstrated that the Water Convention was increasingly acting as a catalyst for negotiating new, and strengthening existing, transboundary agreements and institutions, including beyond the pan-European region.

III. Accelerating progress on transboundary water cooperation to achieve sustainable development

A. Status of progress in achieving Sustainable Development Goal target 6.5

19. Mr. Gilbert F. Houngbo (President, International Fund for Agricultural Development; Chair, UN-Water) set the scene for panel discussion 3 by describing ongoing efforts to speed up the achievement of Sustainable Development Goal 6 through the Sustainable Development Goal 6 Global Acceleration Framework, noting that the world was significantly off track to meet Goal 6 by 2030 and international partnerships and cooperation were key to further progress.

20. Ms. Olga Algayerova (Executive Secretary, United Nations Economic Commission for Europe; Under-Secretary-General) and Mr. Xing Qu (Deputy Director-General, United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO)) presented the main messages of the second progress report on Sustainable Development Goal indicator 6.5.2 (*Progress on Transboundary Water Cooperation: Global status of SDG indicator 6.5.2 and acceleration needs – 2021* (ECE/MP.WAT/65)). Since only 24 of the reporting countries had achieved Sustainable Development Goal target 6.5 on transboundary cooperation in 2020, countries needed to more than quadruple progress on transboundary water cooperation until 2030. The report pointed to “quick wins” as a means of accelerating achievement of Sustainable Development Goal target 6.5 and recommended addressing existing data gaps, upscaling capacity development and tackling the bottlenecks in financing of transboundary water cooperation.

B. Accelerating progress on transboundary water cooperation (panel discussion 3)

21. Many participants emphasized that, since more than 60 per cent of all freshwaters were shared between two or more countries, achieving Sustainable Development Goal 6 was not possible without advancing transboundary water cooperation. A statement delivered on behalf of Mr. Marek Gróbarczyk (Secretary of State, Ministry of Infrastructure of Poland) underscored many challenges in achieving Sustainable Development Goal 6 and that only comprehensive measures taken simultaneously in many areas could help to overcome difficulties.

22. Numerous speakers highlighted that one of the priorities in achieving Sustainable Development Goal 6, including target 6.5, was to improve governance. One of the key dimensions in that regard was better collaboration across boundaries and sectors. Ms. Pipan stressed the need to consider different nexuses – food, energy, health, ecosystems, climate, peace and security – in order to devise adequate responses or establish the right entry points for cooperation. Mr. Darío Soto-Abril (Executive Secretary, Global Water Partnership) recalled that the nexus approach was a tried and tested tool for understanding the trade-offs and benefits that arose from different water uses in transboundary basins and encouraged participants to go outside of the “water box” to find cross-sectoral co-benefits and solutions. He also called for the involvement of multiple stakeholders in transboundary water cooperation processes, urging the participants not to neglect the power of the private sector and stakeholders such as youth and women.

23. Mr. David Choquehuanca Céspedes (Vice-President of the Plurinational State of Bolivia) called upon the participants to look at the root causes of the water crises and completely change the paradigm to an approach based on harmony between human beings and their way of life. He called for alternative solutions based on nature, which would create the proper conditions for meeting the basic needs of all, and emphasized the importance of community-level approaches.

24. Several speakers recognized the relevance of strengthening source-to-sea governance in effective management of transboundary basins, improving water quality, enhancing water

availability and reducing risks of water-related disasters and climate change. Mr. Peter Thomson, the Secretary-General's Special Envoy for the Ocean, stressed that collaborative actions were necessary to meet the targets of Sustainable Development Goals 6 and 14 and that the United Nations provided platforms to facilitate dialogue between the freshwater and saltwater communities. Ms. Iuliana Cantaragiu (Minister for Environment of the Republic of Moldova) and the statement delivered on behalf of Mr. Gróbarczyk emphasized the efforts of the Republic of Moldova and Poland to reduce pollution of the Black Sea and the Baltic Sea, respectively, through transboundary water cooperation.

25. Another key dimension in improving governance for achieving Sustainable Development Goal target 6.5 on transboundary cooperation was strengthening legal and institutional frameworks, including participation in the global water conventions and multilateral and bilateral agreements and joint bodies for transboundary water cooperation. Ms. Pipan, speaking on behalf of the European Union and its member States, stressed the importance of investing in the establishment, strengthening and adaptation of platforms and institutions for transboundary water cooperation and promoting legal frameworks such as the Water Convention. Mr. Thomson stressed that the two global water conventions could be trusted conduits in efforts to protect the marine environment from pollution from land-based sources. Ms. Tatyana Bokova (Deputy Head, Federal Agency for Water Resources of the Russian Federation) stated that her country consistently supported the strengthening of the global status and international image of the Water Convention and called for an increase in the practical focus of the Convention's activities. Ms. Inês dos Santos Costa (Secretary of State for Environment of Portugal) emphasized the need to increase the number of Parties to the Water Convention and to bring new countries to become Parties as a way to promote peace, stability and cooperation. She stressed that it was essential that all States Members of the United Nations be well informed about the benefits of accession to the Water Convention. Ms. Maryprisca Mahundi (Deputy Minister for Water of the United Republic of Tanzania) called for the enhancement of transboundary water cooperation and water diplomacy and expressed the commitment of her country to join the Water Convention. Mr. Nery Martín Méndez y Méndez (Deputy Minister for Water of Guatemala) emphasized that his country was participating to the Meeting of the Parties to learn more about the Convention and actions that could be taken to ensure sustainable management of shared water resources.

26. Several speakers emphasized the importance of financing for accelerating progress on Sustainable Development Goal 6 and transboundary water cooperation. Mr. Soto-Abril called for more investment, both in human and natural capital, to enhance cooperation. Ms. Jennifer Sara (Global Director, Water Global Practice, World Bank) listed the main factors in facilitating financing of transboundary water cooperation such as: legal and institutional frameworks; participatory planning; assistance in preparing bankable projects; and the importance of partnerships and knowledge-sharing. According to Mr. Thomson, inadequate wastewater treatment represented a major threat to the freshwater and marine environment and it was time for the climate finance needle to be moved decisively in the direction of fixing that major threat. Ms. Bokova called for stronger international assistance to developing countries in the framework of the United Nations, specifically in the context of coronavirus disease (COVID-19) pandemic recovery, and reported on projects to improve water supply and develop aquaculture implemented with the support of the Russian Federation in various part of the world.

27. Although the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on transboundary water cooperation progress globally had been significant, several speakers outlined progress achieved in their transboundary basins despite the challenges posed by the pandemic, for example, through the conclusion of new agreements or the operationalization of existing ones. Mr. Georgios Amyras (Deputy Minister for Environment and Energy in charge of Environmental Protection, Ministry of Environment and Energy of Greece) reported on an important positive development regarding the Agreement on the Protection and Sustainable Development of the Prespa Park Area between Albania, Greece, North Macedonia and the European Union. Following the entry into force of the Agreement in May 2019, the three ministers of environment and the representative of the European Commission had held the first virtual Meeting of the High-Level Segment of the Agreement in June 2021, providing political guidance to the joint bodies to initiate practical work. Mr. Adrian Cosmin Vierita (Ambassador Extraordinary and Plenipotentiary, Permanent Representative, Permanent

Mission of Romania to the United Nations Office and other international organizations in Geneva) reported on a new transboundary water agreement signed between Romania and Serbia and the completion of negotiations between Romania and Ukraine for the revision of several regulations on transboundary waters. Mr. Mario Šiljeg (State Secretary, Ministry of Economy and Sustainable Development of Croatia) reported on the Mura-Drava-Danube Biosphere Reserve, recently approved by UNESCO as the world's first five-country biosphere reserve.

28. Many participants stressed the importance of accelerated action and raised ambitions for achieving Sustainable Development Goal 6 and other water-related goals in the context of the United Nations Conference on the Midterm Comprehensive Review of the Implementation of the Objectives of the International Decade for Action, "Water for Sustainable Development" (scheduled to take place on 22–24 March 2023). According to Mr. Hougbo, the Conference would be a watershed moment of accountability for all. According to Mr. Ahmed Ihab Abdelahad Gamaleldin (Ambassador, Permanent Representative, Permanent Mission of Egypt to the United Nations Office and other international organizations in Geneva) there was a need for the United Nations and the international community to play a more prominent role in addressing disputes regarding transboundary water uses and the 2023 Conference presented a golden opportunity to address those issues and achieve a more effective, coordinated, system-wide approach to the challenges of transboundary cooperation.

IV. Conclusions of the high-level special session

29. Mr. Tõnis Mölder (Minister for the Environment of Estonia) summarized the main conclusions of the special session, stressing the important linkages between climate change, water and peace and the role of the Water Convention, which offered an essential intergovernmental platform and tools for dealing with transboundary water issues in a peaceful manner. He emphasized the need to accelerate progress on transboundary water cooperation worldwide to achieve Sustainable Development Goal target 6.5 on transboundary water cooperation by 2030 (for the conclusions of the high-level special session, see the report of the Meeting of the Parties on its ninth session (ECE/MP.WAT/63, paras. 17–19)).
