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PROTECTION OF NATURE OF THE REPUBLIC OF UZBEKISTAN,
AT PART I OF THE 16th OSCE ECONOMIC AND
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**“Maritime and inland waterways co-operation in the OSCE area:
Increasing security and protecting the environment”**

**Protection of Uzbekistan’s water resources and management of the watercourses of the
Aral Sea basin**

Distinguished conference participants,
Ladies and gentlemen,
Colleagues,

I should like to take this opportunity to discuss a number of what we believe to be topical issues that are directly linked to the agenda of this conference. It should be mentioned in particular that the rational and careful use of water resources is one of the key issues facing our planet.

Water is a priority resource of vital importance for Uzbekistan, providing as it does the necessary conditions for the day-to-day existence of its people and the economic development of its society. The principal sources of surface run-off water in the Republic of Uzbekistan are the Amu Darya and Syr Darya rivers, whose total average perennial run-off amounts to 115.6 km³, 78.46 km³ being formed in the Amu Darya basin and 37.14 km³ in the Syr Darya basin. Uzbekistan’s water resources account for only part of the overall water resources in the Aral Sea basin.

As a result of the reduction in the flow of water into the Aral Sea and the Aral Sea region, there began in 1970 a drop in the water level and a rise in the salt content of the Aral Sea, which has since then continued at an accelerated pace. The sea has retreated from the shoreline by a distance of 120 to 200 kilometres, leaving behind on the former seabed more than 45,000 km² of salt flats. Further salinization of the Aral basin is continuing. Currently the salinity of the water constitutes in the western part 110 to 112 grams per litre, and in the eastern part as much as 280 grams per litre in places.

Salt-laden dust storms are destroying crops and vegetation. Fisheries and commercial hunting activities have suffered enormous economic damage, another result being a reduction in the productivity of pasture lands and in the yield of the crops cultivated. The Aral Sea has virtually been turned into a “dead lake”.

Ill-considered and unco-ordinated use of water resources and watercourse regimes has led to the catastrophic shrinkage (drying up) of the Aral Sea.

In accordance with the general principles and norms of international law, States situated along a watercourse must within their territory use transboundary watercourses fairly and sensibly. In particular, a watercourse that is of inter-State importance and that flows through the territory of two or more States must be used and managed by those States for the purpose of exploiting it in the best possible manner and of achieving the related advantages in a way consistent with its proper protection. The States along the watercourse should participate in its exploitation, management and protection in a fair and reasonable manner. This participation includes both the right to use the watercourse and the obligation to co-operate in protecting and managing it.

These principles of international co-operation are reflected in documents of international law (Charter of the United Nations, Stockholm Declaration of the United Nations on the Problems of the Environment, “Agenda for the XXI Century”, Convention on the Protection and Use of Transboundary Watercourses and International Lakes of 1992, Convention on the Law of the Non-Navigational Uses of International Watercourses of 1997, and others).

As of today, of the Central Asian States only Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan have ratified their accession to the Convention on the Protection and Use of Transboundary Watercourses and International Lakes (1992). Under a presidential decree in 2007 Uzbekistan officially recognized the force of the two aforementioned international conventions of 1992 and 1997, thereby for all practical purposes accepting all the provisions of these conventions for implementation.

These international conventions will help to ensure the establishment of an appropriate framework for negotiations by the Central Asian States on agreements reflecting the specific obligations and needs of the parties.

During the 16 years of its independence Uzbekistan has formulated strategies to strengthen the protection of the environment, to put into place systems for managing the use of natural resources, and to develop a comprehensive environmental protection policy.

With the advent of independence Uzbekistan emerged as the driving force behind the creation of a unified system for water resource management and protection throughout the Aral Sea basin. To that end an Inter-State Commission for Water Co-ordination (ICWC) was established to be responsible for the management of the waters of the Aral Sea basin, including the Amu Darya and Syr Darya rivers and also return water.

The Republic of Uzbekistan’s environmental security policy is carried out on the basis of the country’s Constitution, laws, national security doctrine and the principles of the Rio de Janeiro and Johannesburg declarations on the environment and sustainable development in a way that takes into account the Republic’s obligations arising out of its

status as a party to international conventions and agreements and that reflects the legislative experience of leading States.

The scale and complexity of environmental problems require a comprehensive and multidisciplinary approach along with considerable internal resources. The entire range of problems cannot be solved without international co-operation, and for that reason from the very first days of its existence as an independent State Uzbekistan has initiated a process of involving itself in international environmental protection activities on the basis of co-operation with international organizations and with international financial institutions.

One of the components of Uzbekistan's international co-operation in the area of environmental protection involves the expansion of its ties with regional organizations. These include such organizations as the European Union, the United Nations, the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe, NATO, the United Nations Economic Commission for Europe and the United Nations Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific.

Many environmental problems confronting the countries of Central Asia are of a regional character and cannot be successfully dealt with by the efforts of any one country alone (particularly in the case of problems having to do with air and water pollution). These environmental problems can be tackled more effectively and at lower cost, provided that there is co-operation between States. The steps that have been taken by the Central Asian countries and that have been made necessary by the ecological disaster in the Aral Sea basin demonstrate the reciprocal advantages of joint action.

The countries of the subregion have repeatedly given expression at a political level to their desire to strengthen co-operation and expand interaction in the environmental sphere with the competent international organizations and agencies. An example of this desire may be seen in the Almaty Declaration of 1997 of the presidents of the Central Asian States, the Tashkent Declaration of 1998 on the United Nations special programme for the Central Asian States, the Dushanbe Declaration of 2002 and other similar documents.

At a meeting held in Kyzylorda in March 1993 the heads of the Central Asian States signed an agreement calling for joint action to deal with the problems of the Aral Sea and the Aral Sea region and to assist in the environmental revitalization and socio-economic development of that region. On that occasion the heads of State established an Inter-State Council on the Problems of the Aral Sea together with its working body, the Executive Committee, along with an International Fund for Saving the Aral Sea (IFAS).

In April 1999 a meeting of Central Asian heads of State in the city of Ashgabad, which was to adopt the Ashgabad Declaration, discussed how the work of the International Fund for Saving the Aral Sea might be improved and what should be its priorities. On 5 October 2002 the Dushanbe Meeting of Central Asian Heads of State again looked into the situation that had arisen in the Aral Sea basin and considered the problems of the use of water resources in the region.

The heads of five independent States recognized the need for a joint solution to the problems of the Aral Sea and the Aral Sea region and approved the basic guidelines of a programme of concrete action to improve the environmental and socio-economic situation in the basin over the period 2003–2010, setting out proposals for putting into place a new and

sustainable set of measures involving people and nature to restore the productivity of the region as far as possible to its former level.

The initiatives taken in Central Asia are of great importance not only for that extensive subregion but also for the success of regional and global programmes. For that reason the support given to these initiatives by the international community may be a decisive factor in achieving the common objectives of sustainable development.

The sustainable development of the Central Asian region and of each of its countries will largely depend on how rationally we are able to use existing natural resources, especially water resources. If we are to solve the ecological problems facing Central Asia, we need to mobilize the efforts of the countries in the region and to step up co-operation with international financial organizations. We welcome their involvement in implementing specific programmes and projects aimed at improving the environmental situation in the Aral Sea basin.

It is our hope that this meeting will contribute to a pooling of efforts by the countries of the region to tackle the environmental problems facing Central Asia, and that at the same time it will become a useful and essential part of our common actions within the framework of co-operation with foreign partners.

One of the basic measures needed for the protection of water resources against the harmful effects of industrial, building, transport, agricultural and other sites is the presence of water conservation zones and of special shoreline strips where there are bodies of water.

On the whole, work has for all practical purposes been concluded in the Republic to accord the status of protected natural territories to 19 large sites, these being zones where pools of fresh underground water are formed, and to all the major rivers, such as Kashka Darya, the Zarafshan, the Chirchik, the Surkhan Darya, the Naryn and the Kara Darya. For these six rivers the total area occupied by the water conservation zones amounts to 73,116.2 hectares, including 9,852.1 hectares of land occupied by the special shoreline strips.

For the purpose of protecting underground water against contamination and depletion, the State Committee for the Protection of Nature of the Republic of Uzbekistan has completed work to accord the status of specially protected territories to zones where underground freshwater sites are formed: 11 sites of Republic-wide importance and 8 sites of regional importance.

It should be noted that in Uzbekistan the designation of water conservation zones and shoreline strips is nearing conclusion and has been written into law. Nevertheless, in other neighbouring republics in the region no water conservation zones have so far been established.

The basin of the Amu Darya river is fed by the basins of the Surkhan Darya, the Sherebad, the Kashka Darya and the Zarafshan rivers, but of these only the Kashka Darya and Sherebad river basins are located entirely on Uzbekistan territory.

Basic consequences of the degradation of the Aral Sea:

- A reduction in the surface area of the lakes of the Amu Darya delta to 26,000 hectares as opposed to 400,000 hectares in 1960;
- A fall in the groundwater level depending on the distance from the seashore of up to 8 metres;
- A sinking of the riverbeds to a depth of as much as 10 metres;
- The transport of salt-saturated dust within an area of up to 500 kilometres with a concentration of from 0.1 to 2.0 grams per hectare;
- Changes in the soil cover: the area covered by hydromorphic soils has decreased from 630,000 to 80,000 hectares;
- The area covered by salt flats has increased from 85,000 to 273,000 hectares;
- The area covered by reeds has decreased from 600,000 to 30,000 hectares or by a factor of 20;
- The riparian wooded areas have decreased from 1,300,000 to 50,000 hectares or by a factor of 26;
- Changes in climate may be observed within an area of 150 to 200 kilometres;
- A reduction in fisheries productivity from 40,000 tons to 2,000 tons or by a factor of 20.

The environmental changes associated with the drying up of the sea have been accompanied also by a reduction in the inflow of water to the delta and, as a consequence, by a worsening of the drinking water supply (a higher mineral content) and a lower inflow of groundwater, which in turn has given rise to a sharp increase in the disease rate among the population. The higher level of morbidity among the population of the Aral Sea region is to a considerable extent linked to the fact that the air is polluted with salts and harmful substances transported by dust storms from the dried-out floor of the Aral Sea and to the insufficient supply of quality drinking water.

The present environmental situation is a source of alarm for the people living both within the Aral Sea basin and outside it. This has given rise to a large number of projects and project proposals aimed at providing, to one degree or another, solutions to the following problems.

1. Protection of the population against the effects of desertification

- A project to establish local reservoirs along the shoreline of the sea. The first phase envisages the creation of reservoirs over an area of 215,000 hectares. The completion of the project will be possible as financing sources are found;

- The planting of forests over the dried-out part of the sea with the long-term aim of using them as pasture lands;
- To improve the drinking water supply in the Aral Sea region, a component of the programme “Uzbekistan: clean water, sanitation and health” has been completed.

2. Creation or restoration of the greatest possible biological diversity of flora and fauna

For example, the number of saiga antelopes of all populations has declined dramatically: in the Kazakh population from 800,000–900,000 head in the 1990s to 89,000 head in 2001; in the Kalmyk population to 17,200 head in the year 2001; in the Ustyurt population from 30,000–65,000 head to 20,000–25,000 head, with the downward trend continuing.

3. Creation of jobs for the local population by revitalizing fisheries, muskrat breeding, pasture-land cattle raising, processing industries, etc.

4. Creation for the local population of the proper socio-economic conditions needed for raising the standard of living by introducing new requirements as regards the management of water and land resources:

- Programmes are under way to provide social assistance as the public adapts itself to market conditions in the environmental crisis zone and to involve the population in carrying out on their own mini-projects with the help of the International Fund for Saving the Aral Sea.

5. Prevention of a further deterioration in the quality of the environment and restoration of an ecological balance in the Aral Sea region:

- For the purpose of putting into place a system to meter water consumption and to monitor its quality in the rivers, a component of the project “Transboundary monitoring” has been implemented, and work has been started to establish a single system for river monitoring in the Aral Sea basin;
- Work is under way on a component of the project “Dam safety” in each country involving two reservoir dams;
- Work is going forward on a regional project for conducting water conservation competitions;
- Work is in progress on a component of the A1 project “Water and salt management”, as part of which the irrigation and drainage infrastructure is being renovated and improved, with land degradation alleviated and eliminated over specific territories covered by the project.