

PLEASE CHECK AGAINST DELIVERY

The 15th Meeting of the OSCE Economic and Environmental Forum, Prague, 21 May 2007

Key challenges to ensure environmental security and sustainable development in the OSCE area: Land degradation, soil contamination and water management

Address of Janez PODOBNIK
Minister of the environment and spatial planning of Slovenia

Mr President,
Ladies and Gentlemen,

It is a pleasure for me to address the 15th Meeting of the OSCE Economic and Environmental Forum. On behalf of the Slovenian Government and my own, I wish to express my appreciation to the Spanish Chairmanship of the OSCE, the OSCE Coordinator for economic and environmental dimension and the Government of the Czech Republic for organizing this meeting.

Globally, the last decade has been characterized by an increasing frequency of extreme weather and climate events, including droughts and water scarcity. Europe is no exception. Water scarcity and droughts hit the major part of Europe frequently in past two decades.

Over 20th century and during its last decade, most of Europe experienced considerable warming. According to the IPCC 4th Assessment report, the Southern Europe is expected to experience increased heat waves, wildfires and reduced crop productivity. Risk of summer droughts is likely to increase in central Europe and in the Mediterranean area. Annual precipitation is very likely to increase in most of northern Europe and decrease in most of the Mediterranean region. The duration of the snow season is very likely to shorten, and snow depth is likely to decrease in most of Europe.

Projected changes in climate would exacerbate water quantity and quality problems in many water scarce areas in Europe. The above-mentioned extreme climate events have had a major impact on the economy and welfare in many European countries, in particular in the south and south-eastern part of Europe. Water scarcity and droughts from one site and heavy floods from others have induced serious consequences on the environment and society in general. To cope with the situation, several meetings were held at the European and sub-regional level that highlighted the need to strengthen regional cooperation on water and land management. One of the specific outcomes of these meetings was the expressed need for a Balkan Drought Monitoring Centre. A request was made to the United Nations to Combat Desertification (UNCCD) Secretariat to organize a technical workshop on drought preparedness. On other site, water directors within the context of the Water Framework Directive of the EU countries established a Water Scarcity Drafting Group, with the task of preparing a technical document on drought management with the goals of serving as a base document for political decisions on water scarcity and drought management within EU.

The UNCCD Secretariat in cooperation with WMO organized few workshops on the establishment of a sub-regional centre relating to drought in South-eastern Europe (SEE) in the context of the UNCCD. Eleven countries agreed on the establishment of a centre to be called Drought Management Centre for South-eastern Europe in the context of the UNCCD and adopted a “framework for the preparation of a project proposal on the establishment of the Centre”. This framework contains a comprehensive and wide-ranging package of core aims, functions and tasks, which the centre should provide. On 26 September, 2006 decision was made by secret voting of the SEE countries that Slovenia will host the Centre.

The kick-off meeting on Drought Management Centre for Southeastern Europe (DMCSEE) project was held in Ljubljana, Slovenia, from 17 to 19 April, 2007. 32 representatives from 11 countries participated at the meeting. At the meeting a number of decisions were identified as being necessary for the finalization of the project proposal and its modalities of implementation.

We consider water scarcity as an integrated question, and we shall coordinate the activities of the Drought Management Centre with other water-related initiatives in the sub-region such as the ones of the Adriatic Sea Partnership and Framework Agreement on the Sava River Basin.

It is abundantly clear that many of the economic, social and environmental problems we face today are connected to the work of OSCE. Just as the weather and natural resources don not recognise international borders – and every country of the Europe, regardless of its political make-up or level of development, is gathered under the auspices of the OSCE in a unified organised system for security and co-operation – we must recognise that the sustainable development of Europe can only be ensured through the joint efforts of every country in the region. There can be no exception for any country, be it large or small.

In Slovenia we fully recognise that the only way of offering the next generations a future is in sustainable development. It is of vital importance that spatial planning and natural resources management take climate change into account. I am aware that we are only at the beginning of these endeavours, yet we have already started to prepare relevant policies and measures to reduce the vulnerability to droughts. As this meeting is primarily concerned with environmental security and sustainable development in the OSCE area, let me state that as part of our integration with the European Union, the gradual changeover in country's risk management has already begun within Slovenia's environmental policy.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

We are all very much in the same boat ... and that boat is the planet Earth. Today the deterioration of the environment forces us to use our knowledge and modern technology to conserve the environment and reduce desertification, land degradation and drought vulnerability. Everyone must contribute to this. We must not overlook the fact that decades ago the scientists warned of the destructive consequences of excessively

polluting the air and water, and very early on established a system to monitor the situation and promote urgently required research and actions. I have no doubt that this meeting will also lead to recommendations that will form a solid foundation for increasing awareness and good governance of natural resources. This emphasises OSCE's role in preserving environment, ensuring sustainable development, managing natural resources and countering desertification.

Spanish Chairmanship prepared a draft "*OSCE Environmental security strategy*" which provides excellent basis for discussion about our future priorities. I therefore wish you every success in your work in the coming days and a pleasant stay in beautiful city of Prague.

Thank you very much.