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**First Preparatory Meeting of the 22nd OSCE Economic and Environmental Forum “Responding to environmental challenges with a view to promoting cooperation and security in the OSCE area”
Vienna, 27-28 January 2014**

**Opening address of the OSCE Permanent Council Chairperson,
Ambassador Thomas Greminger**

Excellencies,
Ladies and Gentlemen,

On behalf of the Swiss Chairmanship it is my great pleasure to welcome you all to the First Preparatory Meeting of the 22st OSCE Economic and Environmental Forum.

I would like to thank the Office of the Co-ordinator of OSCE Economic and Environmental Activities for their efforts in organizing this Preparatory meeting as well as for their contribution to our common goal – “Responding to environmental challenges with a view to promoting cooperation and security in the OSCE area”.

I warmly welcome all representatives of the OSCE participating States and Partners for Co-operation, high-level officials from ministries and agencies, representatives of international, regional and non-governmental organizations as well as experts from the business sector and academia and last, but not least, the officers from OSCE field Missions in charge of economic and environmental activities.

We are pleased to have you all here and to see that some delegations have integrated representatives of their National Platforms for Natural Hazards or Hyogo Framework for Action Focal Points.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

Natural hazards can strike anywhere, at any time, regardless of boundaries, political situations or other circumstances. They can turn into disasters if we are not well prepared. Many participating States, represented in this room, know from their own experience that the scale, frequency, and severity of such events are increasing.

It is our common responsibility to be ready to respond to environmental challenges. We are convinced that the OSCE participating States should increase cooperation in this field in order to be able to improve the security of their populations.

That is the reason why one priority of the Swiss Chairmanship is dedicated to reinforcing the management of natural disaster risks in the OSCE region. We intend to focus on promoting integrated disaster risk management through awareness building and capacity development using mutual learning opportunities as well as targeted cooperation efforts. We are closely working with the future Serbian Chairmanship to create continuity and consistency. In fact, the theme of this year's Economic and Environmental Forum is part of our joint work plan.

This year, the Swiss Chairmanship proposes to focus on the promotion of an integrated disaster risk management approach. What do we mean by "integrated" and what do we understand when speaking about "disaster risk management"?

"Disaster risk management" means the management of risks before, during and after the event. Managing risks means to work on preventing and mitigating risks. "Integrated" relates to different aspects: to a holistic view of disaster risk management that sees prevention, preparedness, response and recovery as interlinked elements; to a multi-stakeholder approach in which a variety of actors - governmental and non-governmental actors, civilians, academics and practitioners - work together for effective disaster risk management; to an outlook that understands managing disaster risks is a prerequisite for achieving sustainable development and security.

This topic is not new to the OSCE family, but it has so far received limited attention within this organization. There are a number of OSCE commitments that relate to the need to work together in order to promote security and cooperation in relation to environmental challenges and natural risks. These commitments focus on fostering cooperation on disaster preparedness and response. We believe that the OSCE participating States should also increase cooperation when it comes to prevention and mitigation of existing risks. Effective disaster risk management must happen well before a disaster strikes. The fact that natural disasters such as earthquakes, droughts or floods are often transboundary in nature makes cooperation between OSCE participating States not only desirable, but necessary. The transboundary and global risk factors require cooperative efforts in their assessment and management.

This First Preparatory meeting and the 2nd Preparatory meeting in May, will allow for an exchange between governmental and non-governmental actors, between those who might be affected by a natural disaster and those who are working for effective public policies to prevent vulnerabilities, to manage a disaster situation once it hits a community or to recover and reconstruct. At this 2nd Preparatory meeting that will take place in Montreux, in Switzerland, we would also like to invite you to a field visit and we very much hope that a great number of participants will attend.

We want to see the two Preparatory Meetings before “Prague” instrumentally contributing to, and culminating in, an outcome in Prague which we will have defined together in a consultative manner. In Prague we shall come to conclusions on what the OSCE can contribute in managing risks, increasing the security of nations and communities, and in which concrete areas enhanced cooperation of participating States is needed. The Swiss Chairmanship will facilitate this process and count on your support to reach consensus on practical and balanced recommendations for the OSCE.

I would like to thank you in advance for actively participating in this year’s Prague Cycle, for your willingness to engage in a comprehensive dialogue on disaster risk management, and in that way, hopefully, for contributing to the increased resilience of nations and communities in the OSCE region.

Thank you for your attention.