

*First Preparatory Conference for the 17th OSCE Economic
and Environmental forum*

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*Speech of Mr T. Skylakakis, Secretary General for
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Mr Chairman

Ladies and gentlemen,

Distinguished guests,

Dear friends,

It is a great pleasure to be able to attend this Conference, as a representative of Greece, which holds the incoming OSCE Chairmanship. The theme of this Conference deals with an issue of great interest for Greece, migration and its linkages with socioeconomic and environmental policies. Being the special representative of the Greek Ministry of Foreign Affairs on climate change issues, I would like to contribute to the incoming discussion, by focusing on the environmental dimension of migration. I will try to highlight some main points

and then I would be glad to hear the distinguished participants' views on the subject.

Furthermore, here in Prague, we can revisit the conclusions of the recently organized Conference by the UN University in Bonn, concerning the environmentally forced migration and the interplay between migration policies and climate change issues.

We all know quite well that climate change, apart from its obvious environmental impacts, constitutes one of the greatest social and economic challenges – if not threats – that the international community has to deal with, now and in the years to come, with significant influence on migratory patterns.

Things are further complicated by the changes to the world's socioeconomic environment due to the developing world economic crisis. The recently achieved high global growth rate is very difficult to sustain in a world with far less credit than before. This will have long term impact on the further development of certain countries, which are already vulnerable to climate change.

So, the possible combination of climate change and slower growth could urge an even larger number of people to leave their countries and seek a safer environment, than previously estimated.

Climate change is already occurring and today we are witnessing small population movements directly or indirectly connected to it. Of course, climate alone may seem unlikely to be the sole or the most important "push factor" in migration decisions. However, climate change induced droughts, floods, wildfires, extreme weather events and natural disasters are likely to further intensify preexisting stresses in vulnerable regions, such as food insecurity, water scarcity, reduced agricultural production, unequal access to resources, breakout of epidemics and spreading of diseases. This sort of challenges may gradually lead to degradation of infrastructure, weakening of institutions and even put forward a threat to peace and security by compounding the propensity for violent conflict.

The predictions on the number of the people that might be affected in this process vary tremendously. Between 25m to 1b in the next 40 years, while the

Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change [IPCC] has suggested an estimation of 150 million people that will move till 2050 due to climate change. So, today we are not able to predict even the order of magnitude of climate change induced migration. Not only because of the scientific uncertainties but also due to the unmet policy challenges posed by climate change. Moreover, scientists tell us that there is a tipping point beyond which climate change can have catastrophic impacts and cause cataclysmic migratory movements. So even if the issue is long term, the stakes are high both on the research needed for more accurate predictions and on the mitigation and adaptation efforts needed to minimize this possibly nightmarish prospect. The impossibility to securely predict where a climate change disaster will strike next, as well as the difficulty to pinpoint the itinerary of moving affected populations, calls for collective preparedness, especially in the wider region of the OSCE participating states. Climate change is, by far, the most important environmental challenge for migratory movements in the next decades.

The migration of large numbers of people can have significant social and environmental repercussions not only for the areas of origin, but also at the areas of destination and the travel routes in between. The stresses created –especially when we are talking about unprepared and unassisted migration- can ignite conflicts that magnify the negative effects of the migration itself.

Taking all these into consideration, we must have in mind that the wider Eurasian area might be heavily influenced, by possible, environmentally forced, migratory movements, in the years to come. This may happen, not only directly, as Central Asia and Southern Mediterranean are considered to be two of the most vulnerable regions, in terms of climate change impacts, but also indirectly, as climate change will continue to hit sub-Saharan Africa and South and Southeast Asia, where a lot of people are already moving, due to natural disasters . It is more than obvious, that if we pass the “tipping point”, in terms of unpredictable and destructive climate change impacts, then we could expect massive migratory inflows, from these vulnerable

regions, following already existing migratory routes, into the OSCE area.

The issue of climate change and its interplay with migratory flows is high on the agenda of a few countries as well as of certain international organizations, including the United Nations, the International Organization for Migration of course, and the European Union. It is important, however, to further pursue the relevant debate in the appropriate international fora, such as the Global Forum on Migration and Development –the next one will as you know take place in Athens in 2009- and the IPCC.

We should also address the growing need to shape the appropriate policies which can meet this challenge. Environmentally induced migration sets new questions, in terms of both international and national law, especially for those who are moving due to a situation of an unexpected emergency. This is an issue that will emerge as the relevant scientific discussion has already started. However we should not forget that the majority of the moving populations are usually internally displaced and that it is always difficult to make sure

whether the motives are environmental or socioeconomic or a combination of reasons that is difficult, close to impossible to unbundle.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

The financial crisis our planet is currently facing has demonstrated that long-term prosperity cannot be taken for granted. It requires preparedness and the ability of collective responses. This highlights the key role that the OSCE can and should play in the area of the second dimension, towards promoting good governance and raising environmental awareness amongst the 56 participating states.

At this stage, allow me to bring to your attention, that in Greece we have gained a valuable experience both in emigration and immigration over the years; an experience that has taught us that migration is above all a matter of human relations, closely linked to the social and economic structures both of countries of origin and destination. It is precisely this deep knowledge that Greece wishes to share by selecting migration management as the theme of this Conference. This choice follows a series of relevant Greek initiatives. For example, the Greek chairmanship of the Human Security Network was aimed at the impact of climate change on vulnerable groups like environmentally induced migrants.