

2.5. “International Co-operation and the OSCE Contribution to protecting the Environment”

Statement at the OSCE Seminar on Rehabilitating the Environment

Tashkent, 10 October 1995

OSCE seminars held in Central Asia are an important element of OSCE activities in the region. The topics addressed by these seminars are an expression of the OSCE's comprehensive concept of security. Nowadays, we understand that ecological problems are an important aspect of security – and sometimes more relevant and more difficult to solve than military ones.

OSCE seminars afford an opportunity to all OSCE States to learn more about their partners in Central Asia and their concerns and problems. At the same time, countries of Central Asia can acquaint themselves with experience and technology from Europe and North America. This mutual learning process will assist in identifying of the ways and means by which the OSCE can be helpful in solving the problems of the region. This includes an assessment of what other international organizations, institutions, NGOs and private enterprise could do.

The present Seminar coincides with another OSCE event in Tashkent: the OSCE is formally inaugurating its regional Liaison Office. This Office has been established to foster contacts between the OSCE countries in Central Asia and OSCE institutions. It will be available to governments, research institutions, NGOs and the media to provide information from and for OSCE institutions. May I invite all participants in the Seminar to the inauguration reception this evening.

The theme of the Seminar was chosen by the OSCE States of this region. Central Asia's environmental problems are a legacy from the past. The question we ask ourselves today is: How could it happen that the Aral Sea, once part of the wealth of this region, has become such a dangerous burden? As stressed in the recently adopted Nukus Declaration: “The people of the region now face the consequences of an unprecedented environmental disaster together with the effects of political and economic transition”. If we are to preserve the environment for future generations, we have to learn from past mistakes and avoid repeating them.

We must take action to cope with environmental problems. They transcend national frontiers and are in fact a universal concern. No one State, no matter how affluent or advanced, can successfully tackle these problems alone.

Fortunately, the increasing attention being paid to environmental challenges is accompanied by increasing international co-operation. The recent UN-sponsored high-level conference at Nukus and this Seminar also show the increased complementarity of global and regional organizations in their efforts to stabilize the environment.

Today we have come to realize that the environment is a major factor in the quality of our lives. Environmental protection creates human security. It is also linked with the human dimension, an area of particular importance for the OSCE.

The problems of the Aral Sea are the result of years of neglect under totalitarian rule, with ill-conceived economic policies aimed primarily at achieving high yield in the cotton monoculture. The destruction of the fragile ecosystems have led to the dying of the Aral Sea. It has turned into a toxic pond that threatens to ruin human life and exacerbates economic disruptions. But this disaster can also be seen as a call for concerted action that cannot be ignored. What could divide us in despair must unite us to combat the common foe. This problem is not limited to the region of Central Asia; it is a real threat to the whole OSCE community. The response of the OSCE to the idea of holding this regional seminar, with its wide and high-level attendance, is yet further proof that Central Asia will not be left alone.

The OSCE community shares a concept of security that includes care for the environment. Ever since the Helsinki process began, the CSCE has had environmental problems on its agenda. At Budapest last December, the Heads of State or Government of the OSCE States committed themselves to take the necessary steps toward implementing international agreements on environmental protection. They expressed their intention to work together, jointly with international organizations, whose representatives we are happy to have with us today, to ensure that environmental standards in the OSCE area are maintained.

Although technical in name, this Seminar is also a political exercise. Being neither a development agency nor a financial institution, the OSCE is fully aware of its limitations. Dedicated international agencies, such as UNEP, UNDP and the World Bank, are better placed in terms of expertise and resources to address the practical aspects of the problem. On the other hand, with its comprehensive membership and approaches, the OSCE can provide an additional political framework for this discussion. We are happy that representatives of Central Asia can meet with each other again. By providing an opportunity to draw upon the experience of others, a brainstorming session with non-Central Asia representatives will help identify concrete challenges and generate support for new approaches. Documents or media are good sources of information, but getting first-hand knowledge will hopefully bring about more direct involvement.

The high-level UN conference in Nukus has assessed the magnitude of the problems of the Aral Sea. The countries of the region committed themselves "to future region-wide co-operation in all spheres on the basis of mutual respect, good-neighbourly relations and determination to make significant progress in resolving the human and environmental consequences of the Aral Sea crisis". In this seminar, the topic of the Aral Sea will be addressed on the basis of the results of the UN meeting. The UN and the OSCE meetings will generate better awareness of the problem. We hope that this will result in a convincing international response to this extremely serious situation.

The OSCE offers a flexible framework for discussions. It provides an additional forum for calling the attention of participating States to environmental challenges confronting your region. We would like to make the problems of some a concern for all. Our

forum will serve as a channel for communicating the problems of this region to the other OSCE States.

I have no doubt that by the end of the Seminar we will have a number of ideas and proposals that will inspire future activities, not least in the OSCE's Economic Dimension. I also hope that the Security Model discussion within the OSCE will benefit from this Seminar. Ideas and proposals should contribute to the long-term programme of OSCE activities in Central Asia that I will be submitting to the OSCE in the near future.

I would like to wish this seminar every success. I hope it will make a useful contribution to resolving those environmental problems of greatest concern to the countries of the region. All this will generate interest in the OSCE in Central Asia and heighten awareness of its activities, while stimulating the Organization's interest in the region at the same time.