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United Nations Environment
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**FOSTERING ENVIRONMENTAL COOPERATION IN
THE AMU DARYA RIVER BASIN**

On 20-21 November 2007, representatives of Afghanistan, Tajikistan and international organizations will gather in Kabul, Afghanistan to discuss regional cooperation to address environment and security risks in the upper part of the Amu Darya River basin. The meeting has been organized by the National Environmental Protection Agency of the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan with support from the Environment and Security initiative. It will be an opportunity to both discuss preliminary results of an environment and security assessment carried out by a team of Afghan, Tajik and international experts, and to chart the way towards reducing the risks.

Since the ancient times the Amu Darya has been the main source of life for vast arid lands. Known as Oxus in Greek and Jayhun in Arabic, the Amu Darya is the longest river of Central Asia and its drainage basin includes territories of Afghanistan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan. Agricultural and industrial development, as well as the livelihoods of 45 million inhabitants are closely linked to the availability and sustainable use of its clean water. A strong cooperation on this issue is therefore vital for the well-being and development of the countries in the basin.

At the Afghan-Tajik meeting in Dushanbe in July 2006 H. E. Prince Mustapha Zaher, Director-General of the National Environmental Protection Agency, outlined several challenges for Afghanistan:

"The Amu Darya basin contains our nation's richest farmland. The long years of war took much of the irrigated land out of service, the irrigation systems and farmlands were not maintained, Afghanistan is now undergoing a massive effort to rebuild the country, this includes restoring irrigation systems to the past productive state. It will take us many years and much effort, and will require help from our neighbours and other nations. Other problems we face on a regular basis are soil erosion, drought, flooding and environmental quality issues. We nonetheless hope that we can

responsibly develop Afghanistan to control these problems and to contribute to the quality of the river.”

He further stressed that the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan intends to work together with other Central Asian countries, and referred to Tajikistan as a brotherly partner in the use of Amu Darya's waters for both the development of Afghanistan and the preservation of the benefits for all the nations sharing the basin.

The meeting in Kabul will further discuss the environmental and security risks in the basin, as well as opportunities for cooperation, based on findings by experts from Afghanistan, Tajikistan and international organizations. The assessment undertaken to-date identified a clear need to improve the management of shared water resources in view of an increasing demographic and economic pressure; to closely monitor and mitigate industrial and agricultural pollution; and to promote an active dialogue, exchange of information and cooperation among the basin's states. Experts also point to a potential impact that climate change will have on the availability of water resources and the frequency of natural disasters in the region. Other identified problems, which also present opportunities for cross-border cooperation, include mass deforestation, other threats to the region's biodiversity, and environmental risks associated with military legacy and infrastructure.

The concluding part of the meeting will be devoted to discussing and agreeing on concrete future steps to be taken in order to enhance the effectiveness of the cooperation in the sustainable use and management of the Amu Darya basin.

The Environment and Security Initiative (ENVSEC) was launched in May 2003 simultaneously at the 5th Environment for Europe ministerial conference in Kyiv and the OSCE Economic Forum in Prague, by three international organizations with different while complementary agendas and missions: the UN Environment Programme (UNEP), the UN Development Programme (UNDP) and the Organisation for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE). In 2006, the initiative expanded to include the UN Economic Commission for Europe (UNECE), the Regional Environmental Centre for Central and Eastern Europe (REC), and the Public Division of the North-Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO) as an associated partner.

By facilitating the discussion about possible solutions for local and regional environmental problems the environment and security approach also aims at reducing potential for political disputes through the improvement of the dialogue and the promotion of cooperation in both environmental and security dimensions.

The mandate of the National Environmental Protection Agency (NEPA) is to protect the environmental integrity of Afghanistan and support sustainable development of Afghanistan's natural resources through the provision of effective environmental guidance and management services.

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