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(Item 3 of the provisional agenda)

INFORMAL ROUND-TABLE DISCUSSION ON
THE ENVIRONMENT IN A CHANGING EUROPE

1. In response to the recent and future topical political and economic developments in the ECE region, an informal round-table discussion will be organized during the tenth session of the Committee on Environmental Policy.
2. The objective is to discuss the ECE environment work in the context of EU enlargement and the new focus for ECE region-wide environment work as expressed, in particular, in the Kiev Ministerial Declaration.
3. Panellists and delegates are invited to share their views on the environmental opportunities and challenges of the eastern enlargement from a pan-European perspective.
4. With the upcoming enlargement of the European Union (EU), 25 countries will soon be applying the same environmental policies, standards and rules, and many of the most environmentally active ECE member countries will be part of the EU. The enlargement will also bring about new dynamics in European integration, such as cross-border cooperation with new neighbours through the creation of a "neighbourhood programme" in the context of "The Wider Europe" initiative to be launched by the European Commission in 2004.

5. In the environmental area, the most obvious potential impacts of EU enlargement on ECE will relate to the work of the Committee on Environmental Policy and the governing bodies of the ECE environmental conventions. EU support has been visible in all main ECE activities, namely:

- EU member countries and the European Commission have been very active in the "Environment for Europe" process, through the Working Group of Senior Officials, established by the ECE Committee on Environmental Policy to prepare the Kiev Conference;

- The EU is a staunch supporter of and active participant in the ECE programme of Environmental Performance Reviews. It is foreseen that the EU will support the second round of reviews of countries in transition that are not members of the Organisation for Economic Co-operation Development (OECD) as it did the first. The Committee on Environmental Policy carries out the Environmental Performance Reviews and tries to take into account the capabilities of reviewed countries to implement the recommendations for improved environmental performance;

- Concerning the legally binding instruments, EU legislation and the ECE environmental conventions have often had an impact on each other. The EU has or is preparing to put major directives in place on all subjects covered by the ECE environmental conventions;

- The EU member countries are active in the work involving the transport, health and environment sectors.

Challenges for ECE

6. After its enlargement, the EU will be a more diverse group of countries. The work inside the EU will require a fairly extensive period of learning and adjustment by the acceding countries. The implementation of the body of environmental law will be a great challenge to almost all new members. At the same time this process creates a new dynamism and opens new opportunities for environmental policy with great relevance for the whole ECE region.

7. The accession countries will probably have fewer resources available to actively participate in ECE activities and, as the United States and Canada are selectively active in many areas, the work of ECE will face a new political environment. One of the crucial points concerns the ability of ECE to attract broad and active participation from the non-acceding countries in transition. Even if they value their bilateral contacts with the EU, and some of them aspire to membership in the future, they still lack a multilateral forum other than ECE to have an impact on events in the region.

8. This means that fund-raising to support the participation in ECE meetings by experts from these countries will become even more important. Most of the donors are EU countries and the internal development in the EU may have an impact on this as well. On the other hand, the strong tradition of active multilateral cooperation in these countries would suggest an interest in continuing to support the region-wide environmental work under ECE auspices.

9. ECE needs to increasingly tailor its activities to the less well-off countries in transition, putting emphasis on capacity-building and to help countries to implement relevant policies in particular under the ECE conventions. This could offer an additional dimension for open multilateral cooperation in the region.

10. As the implementation of legal commitments gains prominence, the most interesting experience can be derived from the national level. ECE can provide a useful forum for the exchange of good practices, looking at concrete accomplishments as well as obstacles encountered in the implementation of international legal commitments on the national level. All countries in the region can benefit from this exchange.

11. With this background, the panel discussion is expected to touch upon at least the following questions:

- (a) How can multilateral ECE region-wide environmental cooperation alleviate differences between subregions in the future?
- (b) How should the common interests of the different subregions in the environment best be articulated and implemented after EU enlargement?
- (c) Should ECE refocus its environmental work as a result of these developments?
- (d) How can the dynamism of the enlargement best be used by non-acceding countries?
- (e) Can ECE as part of the United Nations system better use its contacts with partners in the Organization (the other regional commissions, the United Nations global bodies, regionally active United Nations organizations and agencies) to better serve the regional environment?