**Keynote address by Ambassador Tuula Yrjölä, Director of the OSCE Secretariat Conflict Prevention Centre, at the Webinar “Strategic aspects of water resources management in Central Asia”**

**20 May 2021**

Thank you for inviting me to provide some input from the OSCE side to the important topic of water resources in Central Asia. The issue is of great relevance globally and crucial to the development of the Central Asian region, as we heard from the distinguished speakers in the opening and first sessions.

It is also a topic that is dear to my heart for several reasons: firstly, I come from a country with ample water resources – Finland – but one where we also have a high appreciation of water as the driver of social and economic development.

Secondly, Central Asia is close to my heart, as I had the privilege to serve as Head of the OSCE Programme Office in Dushanbe for two years, and earlier, as Roving Ambassador of Finland to Central Asia.

And thirdly, because the OSCE is active in supporting the Central Asian states in developing national strategies and action programmes to manage water resources effectively.

I should add that while we do not engage directly in Afghanistan in programmatic work on this topic, Afghanistan is a Partner for Cooperation of the OSCE and as such we recognize the importance of the water resources of Central Asia to the prosperous development of Afghanistan as well.

Since the adoption of the 1975 Helsinki Final Act, the OSCE participating States have recognized the link between water management, environmental co-operation, and peaceful inter-State relations as an integral part of our concept of comprehensive security.

In the OSCE area, this link is addressed from a dual perspective. On the one hand, in the absence of good water governance, water might become a source of conflict, because the unsustainable use of water resources can upset ecological systems, threatening security and stability. At the same time, well-governed water provides opportunities to build confidence and strengthen co-operation.

With a presence in all five Central Asian states and our rich expertise on security issues – and I know this from personal experience - the OSCE’s field operations are an excellent tool to support their host countries in developing national strategies and action programmes to manage water resources effectively, and to bring national environmental legislation in compliance with international standards.

They also engage in capacity-building for representatives of national institutions and civil society, including in the water sector, and with the OSCE’s convening power, they are able to provide effective platforms for sharing best international practices.

All such activities are closely co-ordinated with other international partners active in the region, such as CAREC (Regional Environmental Centre for Central Asia), UNDP, UNECE (United Nations Economic Commission for Europe), the German Development Agency (GIZ), the Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation, USAID (United States Agency for International Development ), and others.

Let me provide you with a few concrete examples so you get a sense of the breadth of our work.

The OSCE supports the important work of the International Fund of Saving the Aral Sea (IFAS).

In Uzbekistan, our Office works together with the State Committee on Ecology and Environmental Protection so that they are able to assess the transboundary impact of uranium tailings and toxic wastes in the Syrdarya River Basin.

In Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan, we are closely working with the respective hydrometeorology services to monitor the water quality of the Chu-Talas river basin to generate analytical reports for the joint Intergovernmental Chu-Talas Water Commission.

Our field operations support the activities of the 25 Aarhus Centres in Central Asia (13 in Kazakhstan, 4 in Kyrgyzstan, 7 in Tajikistan and 1 in Turkmenistan) in organizing awareness-raising that addresses environmental issues.

And finally, the OSCE Programme Office in Dushanbe, in partnership with UNECE, has been supporting the development of dam safety national legal norms and regulations for the Ministry of Energy and Water Resources of Tajikistan. I want to also mention the already second International Decade “Water for Sustainable Development 2018 to 2028”. I was personally present at the international water conferences in Dushanbe in 2010 and 2018, and am glad that our Office in Dushanbe is continuing to support this important water initiative.

And not to forget Afghanistan, allow me to still mention that our Office in Dushanbe organizes Science for Diplomacy workshops for young water professionals from Central Asia and Afghanistan, to facilitate long-term water related science networks across the region.

I hope that through these examples I have been able to convince you of our commitment to supporting the sustainable use of the region’s water resources - from the OSCE’s perspective, which is always linked to security, stability and conflict prevention. For this, mutual trust and regional co-operation is key.

It is common knowledge that water, as a strategic resource, is an essential element of national and regional security.

Water-related disputes, low-quality water, and lack of access to water, as well as regional environmental challenges, such as extreme weather conditions and melting glaciers, to which Central Asia is significantly exposed, have negative impacts on the well-being and health of local communities.

Women, children, the elderly, people with disabilities, migrants, and refugees are particularly affected.

Let me recall from my experience in Tajikistan, also previously having worked to establish Finnish cooperation with the Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan in the framework of the Finnish Foreign Ministry’s cooperation program with the two countries, how important the efficient management of water would be, and can be, in the harsh conditions of the Pamir mountains. There most people live in rural areas where there are frequent natural disasters including floods, mud slides, earthquakes, heavy rains and extremely cold periods. Climate change is not making things easier to predict.

The equitable and integrated management of water resources, improving policy coherence, updating the infrastructure and the making best use of economic analysis are some of the important tools for not only bettering the life of the people at the grassroots level, but equally so for the prosperity of the state as a whole. Water security in all its aspects is essential, as we know.

In Central Asia, this issue is closely linked to dramatic geographical differences between the countries, and therefore sub-regional access water resources, as well as agriculture being a key driver of economic growth and food security. So as we well know, regional cooperation has traditionally been necessary, and continues to be of the essence for national and regional security of the states concerned.

In these pandemic times, I don’t need to remind what we all know about the growing evidence that several human activities affecting the environment can also lead to the emergence and spread of new diseases, such as COVID-19. It has become clear that no community, country, or region is immune to such a global challenge.

The background paper for this webinar outlined well the water-related issues that the Central Asia region is grappling with, but also pointing out that there are opportunities for the future, in particular when pooling resources through cooperation.

The effects of climate change are a global challenge, one that forces all countries and regions to seek cooperative, sustainable ways to deal with their water resources – either due to lack of, or increased amounts of it.

We know that the stresses of climate change- related variations in water supply will inevitably be reflected around the world, and this is already happening in the Central Asian region.

In Central Asia disputes over water use for irrigated agriculture are a source of concern, as we know. I was alarmed by the information in the backgrounder that large parts of the irrigation infrastructure in Central Asia may collapse if the present low rates of investment continue.

Another issue is of course the development of ecologically sustainable energy sources, including hydropower.

We will next hear about cooperation on dam safety. Our offices in Dushanbe and Nursultan have worked on this topic as well, partnering with UNECE – supporting the development of dam safety national legal norms and regulations in Dushanbe; and in 2015 in Almaty to organize a regional conference on best practices in transboundary water resources management, with an emphasis on dam safety.

The overall situation calls for integrated solutions across all sectors. Regional water co-operation is key for sustainable development in the region. We have seen over the years – and this is valid around the world - how local challenges can turn into cross-boundary problems.

And because the local can become regional, with wider implications across the societal and geopolitical map, it is of great importance to promote regional dialogue frameworks and increased adherence to international conventions and legal principles governing transboundary resources.

I take the opportunity to remind that the OSCE is the world’s largest regional security organization, and as such, an inclusive platform for political dialogue and joint action. Based on our comprehensive approach to security, we aim to actively contribute to bridging differences and building trust, including through co-operation on economic and environmental issues. And this year, combating climate change is one of the key priorities of the 2021 OSCE Swedish Chairpersonship.

[*Our mandate in this area, following the Helsinki Final Act nearly 50 years ago, includes a number of OSCE Ministerial Council decisions - such as, for example, from 2002 in Porto, or the 2003 Maastricht Strategy Document for the OSCE Economic and Environmental Dimension, and the 2007 Madrid Declaration on Environment and Security*. ]

From this perspective I return to what I began with, which is to thank for including me, and the OSCE, in this important discussion. However

meetings like ours today are only part of the solution.

Water co-operation should include political, technical, and institutional elements and help address concrete problems: For example, access to water resources in disputed border areas, interstate regulation of water flows between upstream and downstream countries, deterioration or reduction of agricultural lands and so, also food security challenges.

I hope that today’s webinar brings forth specific ideas and solutions on how we can tackle concrete challenges and bring the often highbrow and general discussions to a more practical level on which we can move forward, one issue at a time.

The OSCE is there to support, but first and foremost allow me to encourage the states of the Central Asian region to further develop internal cooperation, supported by the organizations that are represented in today’s event. Launching a structured dialogue on the strategic issues faced by the region in water cooperation would be an important step.

Thank you for your attention.