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## **A Matter of Survival: Vision for International Water cooperation**

**by**

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Distinguished Participants,

It is a great honor and pleasure to address you today, at the opening Of the Mekong River Commission's International Conference.

It is also highly symbolic that this important conference is taking place at the beginning of a decade that will be significantly marked by a global discussion on the comprehensive water management and transboundary water cooperation.

As you know, ten days ago the UN General Assembly launched the Water Action Decade (2018 - 2028). This decision of the World's highest representative body has recognized the global problem of water. This problem is more and more often described as the world's water crisis and its most acute form is reflected in the growing drama of water scarcity. At the same time, the intensified international discussion on water also expresses the emerging will of the international community to put water management and water cooperation much more into the center of the international agenda.

The launching of the UN's Water Action Decade last week in New York was also marked by reports of the three high level panels: The Global High Level Panel on Water and Peace that I had the privilege to chair; the joint UN-World Bank High

Level Panel on the Sustainable Goal Six (Water and Sanitation) and the Global Panel on Water Related Disasters.

All these activities are an expression of the growing awareness that water is already one of the major challenges of the 21 Century. The World needs to fundamentally rethink its global approach to water - as a matter of survival. This is also the key message of the Global High Level Panel on Water and Peace - and the title of our report.

Our panel has started all the main aspects of the nexus between water and peace. These aspects include, but are not limited to the situations of contemporary armed conflicts. In these conflicts we see that water has been often used as a weapon or tactic of war or as an object of attack with devastating effects on the civilian populations. Humanitarian organizations such as ICRC and UNICEF have provided disturbing insights. Our panel has joined its voice to the appeals for respect of international humanitarian law and for better protection of water resources and installations from any form of violent attack, including terrorist attacks. Moreover, we made a number of specific recommendations to the UN Security Council, the global body with the primary responsibility for the maintenance of international peace and security.

However, the bulk of our report is devoted to water in time of peace, to prevention of armed conflicts, to management of water related tensions and to the importance of water cooperation as an instrument of peace.

Water is life and must therefore be an instrument of peace. Water is also a shared resource and must therefore be a matter of cooperation.

The existing forms of international water cooperation are a significant instrument of peace and must be treated as such. Wise water governance goes a long way to

promoting stability and peace. Trade-offs that are necessary between various uses of water, such as agriculture, energy generation, mining, human consumption and other have to be carefully taken into account in the designing of comprehensive water governance. It is precisely the quality of water governance that provides an important opportunity for both - the deepening of cooperation among states, and, importantly, for the involvement of all stakeholders in decision making. The Panel has heard many voices. We heard the repeated aspiration for people's participation and "people's diplomacy" in the processes of decision making on water. This is the surest way to avoiding or reducing water related tensions

Application of water quality standards is critical in this context, and it is vital for the protection of environment. The Panel made a number of recommendations regarding the improvement of systems of gathering of water data and development of water quality standards.

And, importantly, our Panel has also studied the question of investment in water infrastructure, in particular the transboundary infrastructure. We believe that, in addition to the utilization of the existing financial facilities, it is necessary to develop new instruments that will support investment in transboundary water infrastructure. One of such instruments should be a blue fund to be established to provide financial resources, on a preferential and concessional basis for the financing of the ancillary costs - such as interest and insurance costs - of large transboundary infrastructure projects. This will not require massive additional resources. Instead, it would require smart allocation of finance to support transboundary water cooperation. In addition, a new, blue fund would provide assistance to early engagement in consultations about future projects, for timely identification of risks and for their reduction or removal. In other words, financial innovation and water diplomacy should go hand in hand with the view to strengthening the transboundary water cooperation.

Why is this cooperation so important from a global perspective? A simple statistic explains the whole situation. There are 286 shared river basins in the world, involving 148 states but only 84 transboundary water cooperation arrangements. In addition, according to estimates, around forty per cent of global population depends on water resources from transboundary rivers, lakes and aquifers. Transboundary water cooperation will be vitally important for the global water governance and, yes, for the future of the humankind.

It is necessary to fully appreciate the existing forms of transboundary water cooperation and discuss the ways to further strengthening of their effectiveness. They provide valuable mechanisms for joint exchange of information on water, for management of water quantity and quality and for investment in and development of water infrastructure. Some among them, and Mekong River Commission features prominently among them, cover large river basin areas and are especially valuable. They represent an opportunity for the strengthening of inclusiveness of their governance structures, for joint efforts of states and all the stakeholders and for water diplomacy.

The necessary trade-offs are more effective when they are resulting from joint efforts and from involvement of the representatives of the affected people. The basin wide mechanisms offer invaluable opportunities to achieve such effectiveness.

The current conference offers a good opportunity to reflect on the ways forward. One of the questions that deserve special attention relates to the involvement of all riparian countries into the river basin cooperation. To optimize the basin-wide benefits it is important to involve all lower and upper riparian states. In the case of Mekong this is particularly important. The increasing involvement of China and the growing importance of the Lancang - Mekong Cooperation Mechanism offer important opportunities for new win-win outcomes. It is noticeable that only in a few years this new mechanism has already produced the first results. In addition, it has

generated legitimate expectations that it will significantly contribute to the reduction of poverty in the region.

Ideally, The Lancang - Mekong Cooperation Mechanism and the Mekong River Commission should complement each other. An increasing exchange of data and of technical expertise would go a long way into integrating the two into a coherent process of policy making. This is, obviously for the participating states to discuss and decide. Forms can vary while the results will be appreciated by the people concerned and by the international community as a whole.

Current developments, both those in the Lancang - Mekong basin and those at the global level, carry an important political message. They clearly suggest that the time has come to generate strong political will for the strengthening of international water cooperation and for leveraging water as an instrument of prosperity, stability and peace. This, in turn, requires engagement of political leaders at the highest levels of government. The time is ripe for seeking new levels of transboundary water cooperation and, indeed, of all forms of international water cooperation.

Developments in the the basin of the mighty Mekong are therefore of global importance.

I wish the Mekong River Commission International Conference all success