



**PLEASE CHECK AGAINST DELIVERY**

**Statement**

**by**

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**United Nations Under-Secretary-General**

**Executive Secretary**

**of the United Nations Economic Commission for Europe**

**at**

**Third extraordinary session of the Meeting of the Parties to the Convention on Access to Information, Public Participation in Decision-making and Access to Justice in Environmental Matters (Aarhus Convention)**

**Geneva, 23 June 2022**

Ladies and Gentlemen,

It gives me great pleasure to welcome you to the third extraordinary session of the Meeting of the Parties to the Aarhus Convention.

You have gathered here today with an important task at hand. As you know, last year at its seventh ordinary session, the Meeting of the Parties adopted decision VII/9, establishing a rapid response mechanism for the protection of environmental defenders. This is a landmark decision, representing the first such mechanism specifically safeguarding environmental defenders to be established within a legally binding framework, be it under the UN system or any other intergovernmental structure. Today, you will take the next step with this important work through the election of the Special Rapporteur on environmental defenders.

The importance of this mechanism and of today's election should not be understated. Environmental protection is deeply connected to the promotion of human rights. This has become central to the discourse on both human rights and sustainable development. This interdependence is firmly recognized in the Aarhus Convention. More than 20 years on from its entry into force, it remains, along with its Protocol, the only legally binding global instrument on

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environmental democracy, bridging the gap between environmental and human rights.

It follows that environmental defenders, who strive—often at great personal risk—to protect and promote the universal right to a clean, healthy and sustainable environment, are vital to ensuring a truly sustainable future for both people and planet. This, too, is recognized under the Aarhus Convention, which requires Parties to ensure that persons exercising their rights under the Convention shall not be penalized, persecuted or harassed in any way for their involvement.

It is crucial that environmental defenders be able to exercise their rights under the Convention without fear. Early, effective action is urgently needed to respond to reports of violations of these rights. The work of the Special Rapporteur will be an important tool for making this a reality. The UNECE takes great pride in servicing the Aarhus Convention, and we look forward to supporting the Special Rapporteur on environmental defenders in this work.

We also look forward to learning from the participants assembled today and in tomorrow's Round Table. You bring with you a wealth of expertise and experience on the frontlines of this issue, which will make a valuable contribution to informing the work of the Special

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Rapporteur.

On behalf of the UNECE, I would like to express my appreciation to Austria and Ireland for leading this important area of work. I thank all delegations from Parties and Signatories to the Aarhus Convention, together with representatives of other States, international, regional and non-governmental organizations, parliamentarians, and other representatives of civil society for joining this important event. I commend you all for meeting here to take this important step to advance environmental democracy. Through this work, you continue to send a clear message to environmental defenders that that they will not be left unprotected.

Thank you.

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