

6 March 2013

**Statement of H.E. Mr. Vuk Jeremić,
President of the 67th Session of the General Assembly,
at a Meeting of the High-Level Panel on Water and Disaster**

Mr. Secretary-General,
Your Imperial Highness,
Your Royal Highness,
Prime Minister Han,
Distinguished Participants,
Ladies and Gentlemen,

It is my great honor to address this High-level Panel meeting in support of Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon's esteemed Advisory Board on Water and Sanitation. I take this opportunity to thank him for his leadership in galvanizing global action on water and disaster-mitigation issues.

I would also like to express my heartfelt appreciation to His Imperial Highness, Crown Prince Naruhito, as well as to His Royal Highness, Willem-Alexander, Prince of Orange, for their steadfast dedication to advancing the mission of the Board.

Finally, allow me to acknowledge the unfaltering commitment of former Prime Minister of South Korea, Han Seung-soo one of most notable predecessors, and the founding Chair of this High-level Panel and of UNSGAB.

Excellencies,

I hope that the results of today's discussions will help set the tone for upcoming water-related events, such as the High-Level International Conference on Water Cooperation to be hosted by the Republic of Tajikistan in August, the Stockholm World Water Week a month later, and the Budapest Water Summit in October.

I also expect the outcome of this meeting to be an important input to the General Assembly's High-Level Interactive Dialogue which I have convened for March 22nd World Water Day.

Its main objective will be to identify water-related issues for which stronger international political commitment is required, as well as to highlight innovative practical solutions to overcoming the challenges they pose.

Excellencies,

An increasing number of water-related disasters are affecting Member States in every corner of the planet.

Just four months ago, Hurricane Sandy swept across the Caribbean and parts of North America, claiming close to two hundred lives and resulting in appalling destruction. Thousands of people, both in the developed and developing world, are still recovering.

Entire neighborhoods are being rebuilt, and work is ongoing to rejuvenate agriculture, energy, and transportation infrastructures in the hardest-hit areas. The final cost is expected to run to tens of billions of US dollars.

Almost two years ago, a tsunami ravaged north-east Japan, drowning over 16,000 people and rendering hundreds of thousands homeless.

I personally will never forget this dreadful day because I was a foreign minister on a state visit to Japan, leaving Japan on the very day it happened, and landed in Europe having learned about the devastation.

In 2006, the river Danube flooded over its banks, severely impacting the economies of Southeast European states, including my home country of Serbia.

In Southern Africa, the floods have been getting worse, destroying crops and leaving people without livelihoods at higher rates than ever before and in Southeast Asia, floods caused by cyclones regularly cause death and the wanton destruction of property valued in the millions of dollars.

The problems we face are thus truly global in the essence, although it is the poorest nations that inevitably bear the greatest burden. Low income countries are generally less resilient to climatic shocks and are slower to recover from resulting disasters. The Least Developed Countries and the Small Island Developing States are particularly vulnerable in this regard.

Excellencies,

The risks of extreme weather events are being multiplied by a range of factors including climate change, increased population pressures, declining ecosystems, and unplanned urbanization. We can expect water-related disasters to increase unless we tackle these issues in a global coordinated effort.

An alarming recent report by the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development has projected that the number of people living in seriously water-stressed river basins across the world will double between 2000 and 2050, to 3.9 billion people.

It is clear that we need to work much more closely together in order to properly address this grave threat. As President of the General Assembly, I believe it is critical for Member States to consistently implement resolutions in support of disaster risk reduction. I will continue to do my utmost to facilitate further discussion and action on this issue.

Excellencies,

There are severe limits to our capacity to prevent natural disasters from striking, but the same cannot be said of our ability to mitigate the consequent high death tolls and expansive destruction. These are far from inevitable they can and, in my view, must be prevented.

I strongly support UNSGAB's "Six Imperatives" a common-sense approach that focuses on enhancing preparedness before adversity strikes, as well as improving post-disaster responses, particularly the provision of safe water and sanitation services. It also encourages the incorporation of risk reduction strategies as an integral part of development planning, and prioritizes the establishment of systems to forecast, inform, alert, and evacuate water-related disasters.

Such an approach was recently endorsed at a meeting which took place in the Liberian capital of Monrovia in January. Governments from across the African continent, together with development partners such as the UN, identified holistic water resource management as a key instrument for mitigating the impact of climate change.

It is clear that issues like water cannot be addressed by the efforts of individual nations. The growing stress on water resources can only be ameliorated if every Member State commits to participating in a common effort, whilst recognizing at the same time that water infrastructure modernization is a core national interest.

That is why I believe we should address the relationship between water and disasters within the nascent framework of the post-2015 development agenda.

The General Assembly was given the responsibility by world leaders last June in Rio to adopt the Sustainable Development Goals a central pillar of the post-2015 agenda. In fact, I believe this is a strategic issue of the first order one that will frame much of the UN's work for decades to come.

The recent formation of our Open Working Group, which is responsible for with defining the SDGs and presenting them to the plenary in the 68th Session, is a welcome development.

I have scheduled its first meeting for March 14th, and will give its deliberations my full attention. By the end of this session, I hope the Group may be well on its way to fulfilling the task of formulating the Sustainable Development Goals, which in my view should address, amongst others, the challenges we have come together to discuss today.

Excellencies,

We must act with all deliberate speed to secure a safe and sustainable world. As the Secretary-General himself remarked in his speech after being elected to a second term, "we have to link the dots among climate change, food crisis, nutrition, water scarcity, energy shortages and gender empowerment." This is what he calls the "golden thread."

It is my firm belief that the General Assembly, as the chief deliberative, policymaking and representative organ of the United Nations, should play a more visible and active role in weaving this golden thread more seamlessly together in the period before us.

Thank you for your attention.