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Sustainable development

Letter dated 12 September 2013 from the Permanent Representative of Uzbekistan to the United Nations addressed to the Secretary-General

I have the honour to convey to you the programme of measures on eliminating the consequences of the drying up of the Aral Sea and averting the catastrophe of the ecological systems in the Aral Sea region (see annex).

I would appreciate it if you could circulate the present letter and its annex as a document of the sixty-eighth session of the General Assembly.

(Signed) Dilyor **Khakimov**
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Annex to the letter dated 12 September 2013 from the Permanent Representative of Uzbekistan to the United Nations addressed to the Secretary-General

[Original: Russian]

Programme of measures on eliminating the consequences of the drying up of the Aral Sea and averting the catastrophe of the ecological systems in the Aral Sea region

Humanity today is facing ecological problems of unprecedented scale and destructive capacity that threaten the very existence of all living things on the planet. It is for precisely this reason that the environment and climate change are on the agendas of various prominent international and regional organizations, institutes, forums and summits. The United Nations has made environmental sustainability one of the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs). The United Nations Conference on Sustainable Development (Rio+20 Conference) placed environmental protection and combating the negative impacts of climate change on the United Nations sustainable development agenda beyond 2015.

One of the gravest global environmental disasters of modern times is the tragedy of the Aral Sea facing the countries of Central Asia and their population of some 60 million. Its environmental, climatic, socioeconomic and humanitarian consequences make it a direct threat to sustainable development in the region, and to the health, gene pool and future of the people living there. The Aral Sea region crisis directly affects Turkmenistan, Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan, and affects Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan indirectly.

Since the 1990s, the States of Central Asia have been doing their utmost to respond to this environmental disaster, but their resources and physical capacity fall short, and the assistance provided by international donors remains limited and inadequate to address fully the problems of the Aral Sea area. As the borders of the area affected by the environmental crisis continue to expand, the scale of that crisis will become ever more disastrous, with far-reaching consequences not only for countries in the region but also far beyond its borders, unless additional assistance from the international community is brought to bear.

The Aral Sea catastrophe stands as convincing evidence of the interplay between the environment and strategic security. For this reason, the countries in the region affected by the catastrophe are increasingly drawing the attention of the international community to the fact that the destruction of the Aral Sea will have damaging effects not just on the immediate area, but on the entire world.

The countries and the population of the Aral Sea region welcome the commitment of the United Nations, and its Secretary-General to addressing global environmental problems, including the Aral disaster. The visit of the Secretary-General to the Aral Sea region on 4 and 5 April 2010, during which he confirmed the global consequences of the Aral Sea crisis and the need to mobilize the efforts of the international community to resolve it, provided clear indication of this. Following his visit, the Secretary-General described the destruction of the Aral Sea as “one of the worst environmental disasters in the world” and stated that its resolution was the “collective responsibility of the whole world, not only of the nations of Central Asia”.

Until 1960, the Aral Sea was one of the largest closed bodies of water in the world. It was 426 kilometres long and 284 kilometres wide, with an area of 68,900 square kilometres, a volume of water of 1,083 cubic kilometres, and a maximum depth of 68 m.

The Aral Sea region had a large variety of flora and fauna; its waters contained 38 species of fish and a range of rare animals; it was the habitat of 1 million saiga antelopes; and its flora included 638 species of higher plants.

The Aral Sea played a vital role in the development of the regional economy, its industries, sources of employment and sustainable social infrastructure. In the past, the Aral Sea was among the richest fisheries in the world: 30,000 to 35,000 tonnes of fish were caught annually in the waters of the Aral Sea region. More than 80 per cent of those living along the Aral Sea shore were employed in catching, processing and transporting fish and fish products. The fertile lands of the Amu Darya and Syr Darya deltas and the rich grazing lands provided employment for more than 100,000 people in livestock rearing, poultry breeding and raising agricultural crops.

The Aral Sea also served to regulate the climate and mitigated the sharp fluctuations in the weather throughout the region, exerting a positive influence on living conditions, agriculture and the environment. In winter, arriving air masses heated up over the waters of the Aral Sea. In summer, they cooled down over the same waters.

The problems of the Aral Sea arose and expanded into a threat in the 1960s, as a result of the feckless regulation of the major cross-border rivers in the region — the Syr Darya and Amu Darya, which had previously provided some 56 cubic kilometres of water to the Aral Sea each year. A jump in the population in the area, urbanization, intensive land development and the construction of major hydrotechnical and irrigation facilities on the water courses of the Aral Sea basin carried out in previous years without regard for environmental consequences led to the dessication of one of the most beautiful bodies of water on the planet. Within a single generation, an entire sea was virtually destroyed. The process of environmental degradation continues, and the Aral Sea region is becoming a lifeless wasteland.

Over the past 50 years, the total outflow from rivers into the Aral Sea has fallen almost 4.5 times, to an average of 12.7 cubic kilometres. The area of the sea's surface is eight times smaller than it was, and the water volume has decreased by more than a factor of 13. The water level, which until 1960 had reached a maximum of 53.4 metres, has fallen by 29 metres. Salinity has increased by more than 13 to 25 times and is now 7 to 11 times higher than the average mineralization of the world's oceans.

The sand-salt Aralkum desert, with a surface area of more than 5.5 million hectares, is inexorably taking over the Aral region and now covers the dried-up portion of the sea that was once home to a wealth of flora and fauna and served as the natural climatic regulator of the adjacent areas. Constant environmental risk, with its negative impact on the quality of life, health and, most importantly, the population's gene pool, now affects not only the areas around the Aral Sea, but the whole region of Central Asia.

More than 75 million tonnes of dust and toxic salts enter the atmosphere annually from the Aral Sea. The dust plumes that rise from the bottom are up to 400 kilometres long and 40 kilometres wide. According to scientists' findings, the

dust from the Aral Sea is already embedded in the glaciers of the Pamir Mountains and the Tian Shan, as well as the Arctic.

A complex set of ecological-climatic, socioeconomic and demographic problems with far-reaching, threatening global consequences has arisen in the Aral Sea region.

Since the early 1960s, the number of days on which the temperature has exceeded 40°C has doubled, and temperatures of 49°C in the shade have been recorded in places.

Water pollution and the large salt and dust discharge from the bottom of the desiccated sea have contributed to the spread among the population of the Aral Sea region of a number of somatic diseases such as anaemia, diseases of the kidneys, blood, digestive system, respiratory organs and cardiovascular system, gallstones and other diseases. Children are particularly vulnerable to the effects of a dangerous environment. The dioxin levels in the blood of pregnant women and milk of breastfeeding mothers in Karakalpakstan are five times higher than in Europe.

The decline of the Aral Sea's role as a transport corridor, and in fishing, animal husbandry and other types of economic activity, the shrinking of grazing land and reduced soil productivity have deprived tens of thousands of people of their traditional livelihoods.

More than half of the plant and animal gene pool of the Aral Sea region has disappeared, with 11 species of fish, 12 species of mammals, 26 types of birds and 11 species of plants nearly gone.

A brief catalogue of the consequences of the destruction of the Aral Sea would include a shortage of drinking water and a drop in its quality; soil pollution and degradation; a sharp decrease in biodiversity, the worsening of public health and the gene pool; climate change caused by more smog in the atmosphere and, possibly, a consequent shrinkage of ice caps in the Pamirs and Tian Shan, which, to a large extent, feed the principal rivers in the region.

Since the 1990s, all the countries suffering the destructive consequences of the Aral catastrophe have spoken out regularly at the United Nations and in other international and regional organizations to alert the international community to the problems of the Aral Sea and their close connection with regional and global security. In 28 September 1993, during the forty-eighth session of the General Assembly of the United Nations, and on 24 October 1995, during the fiftieth session, representatives of the countries of Central Asia appealed to the international community to provide assistance in saving the Aral Sea and the surrounding region, and warned that this problem could not be resolved without the support and assistance of international financial institutions and developed countries, with the United Nations in a coordinating role.

On 8 September 2000, at the United Nations Millennium Summit in New York, President Karimov of the Republic of Uzbekistan proposed the establishment of a council on the problems of the Aral Sea and surrounding region, under the auspices of the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP), in the interests of promoting international cooperation in environmental protection.

The countries in the region now have every reason to be grateful for the significant assistance provided by the United Nations, international bodies and donor countries in mitigating the consequences of the Aral Sea crisis.

According to a survey conducted by the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) and the International Fund for Saving the Aral Sea (IFAS) on donor assistance in the Aral Sea basin, the total volume of international donor assistance for the whole Aral Sea region for the period 1995 to 2012 was around 1,145,000 dollars.

The main outcome of the Secretary-General's 2010 visit to the Aral Sea region was the decision to launch the Joint United Nations 2012-2015 programme entitled "Sustaining Livelihoods Affected by the Aral Sea Disaster", which calls for the UNDP Aral Sea Programme, the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), World Health Organization (WHO), United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA), and the United Nations Volunteers (UNV) to pool their efforts in the Aral Sea region. The overall budget of the programme, financed from the United Nations Trust Fund for Human Security, is around 4 million dollars. The programme is designed to enhance the well-being of the most vulnerable segments of the population, provide support to improve access to basic social infrastructure, contribute to the creation of new sources of income, support entrepreneurship among women and young people and improve health care.

These all represent tangible support for the population of the Aral Sea region from the international community.

Enormous efforts are being devoted to practical counter-measures at the national level, a key example being the establishment of IFAS by Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan in January 1993.

The main goals of IFAS are to preserve the biological heritage of the Aral Sea region and to reduce the destructive impact of the ecological crisis on the environment and, most importantly, on the livelihood of the region's inhabitants.

In December 2008, IFAS was granted observer status in the General Assembly.

The efforts of IFAS have borne fruit in the form of the two programmes conducted from 1995 to 2010 to assist the countries of the Aral Sea basin (ASBP-1, ASBP-2).

Using their own national resources for the most part, the countries of Central Asia have made significant efforts as part of these programmes to develop mechanisms for the joint management of Aral Sea basin water resources; rehabilitate the areas affected by the ecological disaster; supply fresh drinking water; improve public health, and reduce poverty and unemployment. The overall contribution of the IFAS member countries to the implementation of the ASBP-2 projects for 2003-2010 was more than 2 billion dollars. Donor assistance to implement the programme projects was more than 1 per cent of this amount.

Implementation of the third programme, ASBP-3, devised for the period 2011 to 2015 by the IFAS Executive Committee in cooperation with organizations of the United Nations system, the World Bank, Asian Development Bank and European Union, as well as the Governments of a number of donor countries, is under way, with more than 300 projects potentially receiving funding of over 8.5 billion dollars.

The plan of action adopted in the wake of the international conference on the Aral Sea crisis, its impact on the gene pool, flora and fauna and international cooperation for mitigating their consequences, held with the support of the United Nations on 10 and 11 March 2008 in Tashkent, provided input for the ASBP-3 programme.

The plan of action provides for the implementation of projects in nine areas: water supply and the development of utilities and public services; improving land reclamation, health-care services, education and science; job creation; gender equality; developing transport infrastructure; combating desertification; environmental protection and alternative energy, totalling more than 100 projects valued at about 1.5 billion dollars.

During this period, all of these problems have remained at the centre of the attention of the IFAS member States, and implementation of projects in the areas indicated has relied on resources from national budgets and also from the United Nations, international foundations and donor countries.

The most significant measures have been focused on resolving water shortages and desertification; reducing water consumption; countering the salination and degradation of land under cultivation; improving public access to drinking water; and establishing the infrastructure needed to treat diseases caused by changes in the environment and climate in the region.

Loans from the World Bank, the Asian Development Bank, the Islamic Development Bank and other financial institutions have played a major role in implementation of the projects focused on these goals and on the restoration and modernization of the irrigation and drainage network.

Over 1.2 billion dollars have been invested in these efforts over the past 10 years in Uzbekistan alone.

These measures have resulted in a reduction of 21 per cent in annual water withdrawal in Uzbekistan since the 1980s, from 64 billion to 51 billion cubic meters. Per capita water consumption has decreased from 3,000 cubic meters to 1,700 cubic meters per year.

A thoroughgoing environmental legal and regulatory framework has been set up over time.

In order to strengthen legislative activities related to the environment and response to the Aral Sea crisis, the Ecological Movement of Uzbekistan, which holds permanent membership in the legislative chamber of the lower house of Parliament (Oliy Majlis), was formed in 2008.

Around 75 million dollars in World Bank loans has been devoted to improving land reclamation and removal of harmful water runoff in southern Karakalpakstan.

In 2011, the 68,700-hectare Lower Amu Darya State Biosphere Reserve was created for the purpose of preserving and restoring the land, flora and fauna, and to stimulate economic and human development.

The implementation of the first round of the project, entitled "Creation of local bodies of water in the Amu Darya delta" helped to bring into operation five water drainage facilities, establish 45 kilometres of shore protection dams, and create water-regulation reservoirs with a water surface area of 70,000 hectares and an

overall volume of 810 million cubic meters. Over the past 15 years, 180,000 hectares of the Amu Darya River delta have been irrigated, and local lakes have been created. There are plans to expand their surface area up to 230,000 hectares.

In the area affected by the Aral Sea crisis, 740,000 hectares of forest have been planted, including 310,000 hectares on the dessicated seabed, and there are plans to plant on a further 200,000 hectares of dessicated seabed over the next few years. In Karakalpakstan over the last 15 years, about 1,700 kilometres of drainage networks have been brought into operation in rural areas, the provision of drinking water to the population has increased almost fourfold, and more than 100 rural medical polyclinics, most of the maternity hospitals now operating in the area and a national oncology centre have been built, reconstructed and supplied with medical equipment. Between 1997 and 2012, modern outpatient polyclinics with a capacity of 32,600 visits per shift were brought into operation in the Republic of Karakalpakstan and the Khorezm, Bukhara and Navoiy regions. Hospitals were built and reconstructed, providing a capacity of 5,800 beds; and 840 rural medical centres are in operation. As a result, in comparison with 1997, the number of congenital abnormalities in the Republic of Karakalpakstan was reduced by a factor of 3.1, maternal mortality halved and infant mortality decreased by a factor of 2.4.

A 1.3 billion-dollar-plan to finance projects and measures in the Aral Sea region has been approved for 2013, providing for the creation of small local bodies of water in the Amu Darya delta, construction of water intake facilities with desalination installations, the creation of protective forest plantations and ornithological monitoring of bodies of water in the southern part of the region.

However, the continuous deterioration of the environmental, socioeconomic and humanitarian effects of the dessication of the Aral Sea and the degradation of human habitation in the region make it obvious that, without substantive assistance from the United Nations and the international community, it will be impossible to resolve what is by definition a problem that affects the whole planet.

In contemplating further ways to address the situation in the region, we clearly recognize that restoring the Sea to its previous boundaries is impossible. This process has already advanced so far that it cannot be reversed. The actual process of resolving the related problems is a very difficult one. What is primarily needed is to rescue the people who live around the dying sea and to stabilize the ecosystem of the region.

The countries directly bordering the Aral Sea region would like to see the humanitarian dimension of the work of the United Nations and the recognition that human security is now of primary importance among its activities more directly embodied in a solution to the Aral Sea crisis.

In this connection, the issue is not now one of saving the Aral Sea itself, but of halting negative trends that could lead to irreversible changes in the lives of the people of the region. The task is not to save the water, but to address rehabilitation of the Aral Sea region, preserve the health and gene pool of the population, restore and protect the ecosystems, and create all the necessary conditions for people to have decent lives.

With the negative situation becoming ever worse in the Aral Sea basin and the adjacent area, urgent additional measures are needed to counter the catastrophic consequences of the dessication of the Sea, and create the requisite

socioenvironmental and humanitarian conditions for the 60 million people living there and in the immediate vicinity.

The scale of the tasks ahead requires more effective coordination of efforts and pooling of resources at the national, regional and international levels in order to prevent even greater disaster in the area.

In this connection, there is a need to adopt as an official document of the sixty-eighth session of the General Assembly the Programme of measures on eliminating the consequences of the drying up of the Aral Sea and averting the catastrophe of the ecological systems in the Aral Sea region, including the implementation of the following fundamentally important stabilization measures:

I. Creation of conditions for life, reproduction and preservation of the gene pool in the Aral Sea region.

This primarily has to do with providing the population with clean drinking water, the development of the social infrastructure, improving preventive and medical services, and stimulating employment and income growth.

Particular attention is to be devoted to the implementation of projects to protect the health of mothers and children, improve rural medical facilities and update equipment at those facilities.

II. Improved measures to manage and save water. Protecting natural bodies of water in the Aral Sea catchment area. This has to do with the formation and development of available bodies of water in the Amu Darya River delta, devising agreed mechanisms for management and protection of water resources in the Aral Sea basin, and introducing integrated management of water resources in the basins of the Amu Darya and Syr Darya Rivers.

The reconstruction of irrigation and drainage systems and the introduction of modern water-saving irrigation technologies are of paramount importance here.

III. Implementation of large-scale measures to plant forests on the dessicated bed of the Aral Sea and prevent desertification in the region.

Measures to prevent erosion, to stop and stabilize moving sands, and prevent harmful salt and sand particles from rising into the air are key here.

IV. Preservation of biodiversity, restoration of biological resources and protection of flora and fauna.

Special attention will be devoted to the preservation and protection of disappearing flora and fauna, the creation of nurseries for preserving (restoring) their gene pool, expansion of protected natural territories in the Aral Sea region, the introduction of a stable system of managing wetlands and preservation of grazing lands.

V. Further institutional reinforcement and strengthening of cooperation between countries in the region, in the framework of the International Fund for Saving the Aral Sea, and stepped-up efforts to alert the international community to the Aral Sea catastrophe.