



PRESS RELEASE

Environment and Security Report Highlights Key Issues for Regional Stability and Development in the Southern Caucasus

Tbilisi, 22 October 2004 -- Environmental pollution or disputes over access to natural resources can trigger conflicts and lead to political instability. Such is the message of a new report issued by the Environment and Security (ENVSEC) initiative funded by the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP) and the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE). Released today, the report proposes a set of environment and security priorities where proper policies can be used to reduce tensions and promote sustainable development in the Southern Caucasus.

ENVSEC in the Southern Caucasus was launched in May 2004 to assess environmental threats that generate tensions among communities, countries or regions, and to suggest priority agendas for governments and international organizations.

The ENVSEC Report, entitled "*Environment and Security: Transforming risks into cooperation: The Case of the Southern Caucasus*", suggests that the degradation, depletion, or mismanagement of natural resources can have a negative impact on local and international stability by increasing grievances. At the same time, environmental cooperation can also serve as the basis for international peace-building and post-conflict reconstruction and reconciliation.

The Report identifies three critical issues for the Southern Caucasus: 1) environmental degradation and disputes over access to natural resources, 2) management of cross-border resources and natural disaster risks, and 3) rapid growth of the urban population in capital cities.

First, environmental degradation and disputes over access to clean water, soil and living space could hamper the peace building processes in the Southern Caucasus, says the Report. In Abkhazia, South Ossetia, and Nagorno-Karabakh, minerals and forests are being exploited and radioactive materials are being secretly discarded, thus adding an environmental tension to existing conflicts over land ownership.

The second issue identified by the Report is the management of trans-boundary water resources and natural hazards such as floods and landslides. The Kura-Arkas River, for example, suffers from pollution by industrial waste and abandoned Soviet-era weapons and chemicals. The river is an essential source of fresh water for all three countries in the Southern Caucasus, and its effective management is a critical issue for regional security.

Thirdly, uncontrolled growth of the urban population in the three capital cities increases the environmental risks to the region, says the Report. The influx of people into capital cities includes rural workers as well as refugees and internally displaced persons escaping conflicts

and natural disasters. Population growth outpaces capital cities' ability to handle waste management, water supplies and transportation, and leads to air pollution and poor sanitation.

“Regional and sub-regional cooperation is crucial to solve trans-boundary environmental problems”, said Kalman Mizsei, Assistant Administrator and Regional Director, UNDP Regional Bureau for Europe and the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS).

“Governments and international organizations should take action to turn environmental risks into opportunities for cooperation”.

The Report was produced by the ENVSEC partners (UNDP, UNEP and OSCE) together with national experts from the three countries. Among many other activities, ENVSEC will provide training for journalists on reporting environment and security issues and promote information sharing among journalists in the three countries. ENVSEC also helps governments incorporate strategic environmental assessment principles in national development plans. ENVSEC will establish information centres for local populations in border areas.

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