Time to Adapt:

Climate Change and the European Water Dimension

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Intervention from Francisco Nunes Correia, Portuguese Minister for Environment, Spatial Planning and Regional Development

Mr. Sigmar Gabriel, Federal Minister for the Environment, Nature Conservation and Nuclear Safety;

Mr. Mogens Peter Carl, Director General for the Environment of the European Commission;

Ladies and Gentlemen:

Allow me first and foremost to thank and congratulate Sigmar Gabriel and the German EU Presidency for the timely idea of bringing together experts, stakeholders and policymakers to discuss water and climate change.

Climate change policymaking is the ultimate dot-connecting exercise. No other public policy nowadays conveys a greater sense of interdependence than climate change. And no other public policy is as urgent as combating the changing climate.

Just a couple of days ago former US Vice-President Al Gore visited Lisbon to meet with over 600 business, NGO and policy leaders. It was riveting to

watch such a large gathering overwhelmed by the potency of the facts, and the scale of the challenge, but also excited by the opportunity that early and sound climate policies can bring about.

Climate change is already here, as the IPCC just reconfirmed at the recent Paris meeting! It poses huge threats on major human systems such as on water resources. And because a certain measure of a changed climate is certainly a given, we must start preparing to adapt.

Climate change will have direct impacts on water availability and quality. As we all know, climate change has direct impacts on the timing and variability of water supply, and these impacts have profound implications on many sectors of our society. Water is used for just about all human activities and is essential for the sustenance of ecosystems.

But there are also indirect impacts derived from changes in economic and social activities which may lead to new pressures on the water systems, namely increased water demand and pollution.

Cut-crossing approaches to planning and policymaking are therefore essential.

This conference comes at a time where all Member States are engaged in starting the preparation of their River Basin Management Plans under the landmark Water Framework Directive. Climate change should be considered, as much as reasonable and possible, at all stages of this major planning effort.

In what concerns extreme events, we have all recently experienced floods and droughts at a pace that is possibly related to climate change, emphasising the need to evolve from our current water management practices onto more pro-active, based on risk analysis and more focused on prevention, protection and preparedness measures.

In this context, I should highlight the floods directive and the initiative on an EU action on drought events and water scarcity situations. I'll come to this one later.

Let me now just focus a bit on Southern Europe and the Mediterranean region:

The scenarios of climate change impacts, particularly in Europe, are well known to you all, including the fact that the region around the Mediterranean is one of the areas where climate change impacts will be more intense. The Stern Report only reinforced this concern clearly, stating that Southern Europe, and in particular the Iberian Peninsula, will be the region most affected by climate change.

As a result, annual mean precipitation over southern Europe may decrease at a maximum rate of 1% per decade. However, relevant changes are expected at the seasonal scale. Winter is expected to get wetter at a rate of 1% to 4% per decade, while in the summer southern Europe may observe a drying up of up to 5% per decade or so. Therefore, Climate change will contribute to the worsening of some already existing water stress situations.

And as you also know, in southern Europe, and around the Mediterranean sea, distribution of water resources is significantly irregular both in time and space. In Portugal alone, the annual precipitation may vary three fold from year to year and five fold from the dry interior south to the wet mountainous northwest. This irregularity is responsible for a significant number of water stress situations and obviously further complicates water resources management.

The risk of drought will probably increase and its impacts will be conditioned by the available storage capacity of winter runoff. In the other hand The frequency and magnitude of intense precipitation events are likely to increase, especially in winter, leading to an increased flood risk.

Yes, we also have severe floods in southern Europe, more often in winter. And yes, we have witnessed recently, that central and northern Europe also has water scarcity problems. That's the eye-opening consequence of climate change – and, granted, poor planning practices over the years across many areas of the world.

It is also very likely that the frequency and intensity of summer heat waves will increase. Other conclusions point to adverse changes in river water quality, particularly in the regions where quality is already under threat.

Portugal has since year 2000 been working on integrated scenarios, Impacts and Adaptation Measures to climate change on Water Resources, Agriculture, Forest, Biodiversity, Energy, Health and Tourism.

However, our mitigation and adaptation research has in turn not been sufficiently considered in government decisions.

Portugal will succeed Germany in the EU Presidency. Climate change certainly is a common thread throughout the three presidencies of the Team Presidency. We are fully aware that our credibility largely depends on what we do at home.

Just two weeks ago the Portuguese Prime-Minister announced a further package of climate-energy measures, setting more stringent goals and emphasising our ambition in terms of climate policy both to meet our Kyoto goal and to move ahead for the 2020 goals.

These measures include an increase from 39% to 45% of the electricity production from renewable sources by 2010; an increase from 5% to 10%, by 2010, of the total of biofuels used in transports, anticipating the proposed EU target in ten years; phasing-out of fuel plants by 2008 and 2010; partial fuel switching in coal combustion plants; a public procurement scheme with special focus on buildings and vehicles; and, last but not least, reinforcing the environmental component of the vehicle circulation tax from the current 10% to 30% by July 2007 and to 60% in 2008.

But as we all know, regardless of our success in reducing emissions in the short term, we will have to cope with some degree of climate change.

Adaptation is therefore inevitable and if planned ahead it can significantly minimize the potential costs and suffering associated with climate change. As always, careful planning based on the current knowledge is the key to any strategy aiming at minimizing threats and maximizing opportunities.

A sound water management policy has always required a capacity to decide under uncertainty and forecasting. In this perspective, climate change does not require any drastic change in water management thinking, as it only constitutes an additional source of uncertainty that will influence future values of both the water demand and availability. The main conceptual change is the rejection of the traditional engineering assumption that considers the historical climate as a reliable indicator of future conditions.

Interestingly enough, climate change and water stress, in some cases, will emphatically recall traditional water management practices of arid and semi-arid regions that were “efficient” in conserving this most precious resource. We have to bring back those practices to modernity, in some sense, as part of our adaptation strategies.

Adaptation thus means that the challenge of climate change must be integrated in the overall policy and planning strategy on water resources.

The adaptation strategy on water resources, as well as its associated action plans, must be defined at a basin scale and involve all stake-holders. It must include supply-side actions to increment and diversify water sources and demand-side actions to limit the growth and, if possible, reduce the pressures on water resources. In addition it must

also address more general issues related to economic, social and institutional planning, development, land use and wealth enhancement.

Portugal's National Climate Change Plan will be updated in 2008-9 with the objective of including a full fledged adaptation chapter for Portugal.

It is in this sense also very important to work on the basis of the forthcoming Commission's green paper on adaptation, which will surely provide a cross-cutting basis for Europe's adaptation to climate change.

Given the importance of the transboundary river basins for the Portuguese water resources, (more than 50% of surface water flows from Spain) it is of paramount importance to develop joint projects in cooperation between Portugal and Spain on this topic. Just recently both countries decided to launch a joint study on the impacts of climate change on the Iberian Peninsula's biodiversity. We will surely carry on joint studies in Portugal and Spain on the impacts of climate change on Iberian water resources.

Dear Minister, Ladies and Gentlemen,

I would like to stress, once again, that the views and experiences exchanged at this Conference will certainly help us all to define the necessary steps to establish an overall strategy to adapt water management to climate change.

The diversity of impacts of climate change that will occur across Europe should encourage us to work towards a common adaptation strategy,

based on a real integration of water management and the various sectors which are strongly dependent on the availability of good quality and sufficient water (e.g. agriculture, electricity production, tourism).

Climate Change, on one hand, and Water Scarcity and Droughts, on the other hand, are two main priorities of the Portuguese Presidency later this year.

The Portuguese Presidency will work to take forward the issue of climate change and we will do our best to maintain the momentum vigorously generated by the German Presidency.

During our term, at the Informal Council of Ministers for Environment, that will take place in Lisbon on the 1st September, it is my intention to promote an open debate on Water Scarcity and Droughts on the basis of a Communication on this subject prepared by the European Commission. Discussion will obviously include the linkages with climate change, impacts to other sectors, relation with EU policy, regional relevance and scientific developments.

Portugal intends to work closely with all Member States and the Commission in order to ensure a comprehensive analysis of the main concerns in relation to water scarcity and droughts, considering that it will affect European regions in different ways, with climate change as a spreading cause of this problem.

Let me thank Sigmar and the German Presidency again for this timely and forward looking initiative.

Climate change is upon us. We must act now! Just imagine our children and grandchildren in a couple of decades looking back on today if we had

not taken action. They would ask: “what were they thinking then?!” From our part, rest assured, we want no such question ever being posed.

Thank you very much.