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## First European Forum on Environmental Human Rights Defenders

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Dear friends,

I am delighted to be here. I consider it an honour to be at the first ever European Forum on Environmental Human Rights Defenders. I too hope that it will not be the last, and I too hope that the next one will have more states participating.

I would like to begin by offering my deepest respect to all of you who risk so much to save our planet and the ecosystems for our human survival and thriving.

I am here because of my mandate as Commissioner to support our member states and our societies to turn lofty human rights commitments into tangible outcomes for people, especially for those most on the edges of our societies.

In that role, every day, I see the interplay of attacks on the environment and human well-being. I also see how the defence of the planet is profoundly a human rights responsibility.

I see it in Ukraine, where the Russian aggression targets the environment, risking irrevocable damage.

I see it when I visit slums, where air pollution puts lives at risk.

In Roma settlements that the authorities have located over or beside toxic refuse sites.

I see it when I meet older people who live in fear of the next extreme weather event.

I see it when states seem to stifle legitimate, peaceful protest.

Right now, I see it in the powerful lobbies that would roll back regulation and resist the accountability of the business sector.

And, everywhere I look, attacks and pressure is profoundly gendered, with women and girls disproportionately impacted.

My role is to engage issues such as these with the human rights toolbox. That toolbox is strong, but it needs reinforcement.

That is why I joined the call for a Council of Europe legal instrument on the right to a healthy environment. I leave it to states to determine what form of the instrument, but I am clear that it must be binding. Nothing less will match the urgency of the moment and the rapidly evolving legal context.

Dear friends and colleagues,

It is also why I want to go forward in our essential work as your partner.

Above all, I want to develop a partnership with young environmental human rights activists, so that we can work together for our planet and its people.

Thank you.