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Meeting of the Parties of the Aarhus Convention

Statement by Dunja Mijatović

Council of Europe Commissioner for Human Rights

Geneva (on-line), 21 October 2021

Excellencies, Ladies and Gentlemen,

Dear Chair,

Thank you for inviting me to speak.

As Commissioner for Human Rights of the Council of Europe, I am committed to raising awareness about the link between environment and human rights in its forty-seven member States.

Environmental harm, pollution and climate change interfere with the enjoyment of basic human rights and freedoms.

It follows from this that those who act to protect the environment contribute to the protection of our human rights.

But standing up for the environment often carries heavy risks.

Sadly, there are places in Europe today where environmental human rights defenders are killed, attacked, intimidated, harassed, prosecuted, stigmatised, or otherwise prevented from carrying out their crucial and legitimate work.

Often, public authorities are unable or even unwilling to guarantee their safety and protection.

Support for the work of all human rights defenders, their protection, and the development of an enabling environment for their activities are among the core elements of my mandate as Human Rights Commissioner.

Therefore, I welcome the commitment of the Parties to the Aarhus Convention, expressed in the Geneva Declaration, to establishing and maintaining a safe and enabling environment for environmental defenders.

Further, I fully support your **decision to set up a Rapid Response Mechanism (RRM)** by creating the mandate of an **independent Special Rapporteur on environmental defenders**.

I do hope that this new mechanism will be fully operational and effective as soon as possible.

Let me stress that this can only happen if **adequate funding, full cooperation and political commitment** are ensured by all the Aarhus Convention member states.

Finally, I would like to stress the important work done in the area of environment and human rights by many national human rights institutions in Europe.

We should not forget that because of this work, they, too, can face risks and need protection.

But importantly, they have a crucial role to play in defending environmental human rights defenders subjected to reprisals.

I very much hope that national human rights institutions will become involved with the new Rapid Response Mechanism. This should include easy access as well as an effective exchange of information.

I wish you fruitful discussions,

Thank you.