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WATER AND PEACE
REMARKS BY DR. DANILO TÜRK, CHAIRMAN OF
THE GLOBAL HIGH-LEVEL PANEL ON WATER AND PEACE
(GENEVA, 15 NOVEMBER 2015)

Distinguished colleagues, co-panelists,
Honorable guests,

It is with great humility and with a profound sense of the collective nature of our effort that I accept to serve you as chairman of this important panel. I wish to thank you for your confidence.

I also thank the Government of Switzerland for the initiative and for all the assistance that made the creation of this panel possible. And I wish to thank the Strategic Foresight Group for the unique intellectual and organisational contribution to the project.

Ladies and gentlemen,

We come from different regions of the world and represent a variety of experiences related to the nexus between water and peace. But we share an important common vision:

First, to make a meaningful and practical contribution to international efforts for prevention of water-related conflicts and to the resolution of disputes and conflicts when they occur;
Second, to facilitate the role of water as an important factor of building peace and
third, to enhance the relevance of water issues in national and global policy-making more broadly.

These are ambitious tasks, but also vitally important ones.

There is no doubt that water is among the central concerns of all efforts to protect the environment and to ensure sustainability of development. However, the nexus between water and peace is much less explored. International institutions lack effective instruments to prevent water-related armed conflicts and to use water-related mechanisms for the maintenance of sustainable peace. In these areas our panel is expected to make a contribution.

Each of us brings important experience and specific lessons to the table. And we are all inspired by the achievements of the past.

Water issues usually form an important part of peace agreements. It is fitting to recall that this year we are commemorating the bicentennial of the Congress of Vienna, which established the regime for the river Rhine and the Central Commission for the Navigation of the Rhine.

Next year will mark 150 years since the Paris Agreement establishing the European Commission on the Danube. Both commissions exist today in their modernized forms and are among the elements of European stability.

And there are more recent examples that should inspire our work. My own country, Slovenia subscribes to the Danube Protection Agreement and is depository state of the Sava River Agreement. The latter is the first multilateral issue oriented agreement in South East Europe concluded after the Dayton Peace Agreement which stopped the war in Bosnia. There is a close relationship between regional peace and water cooperation.

A similar pattern of relationship between water and peace was established in Central America. As soon as the Central American Peace Plan was successfully negotiated by the Costa Rican President Oscar Arias, it was followed by a set of regional water cooperation agreements.

The relationship between water and peace is not only a matter of post-conflict arrangements. Water management is an important instrument of prevention of conflict. The establishment in 2010 of the Commission on the Administration of the River Uruguay, following the peaceful resolution of a bitter dispute between Argentina and Uruguay, is an example of the political necessity of administrating environmental matters in an effective, preventive manner.

Moreover, there exist other initiatives, far ahead those known in Europe, that lay down the foundations for long-term regional cooperation and stability. The Mekong River Commission is one example.

The Senegal River Basin Organization is probably the most far reaching arrangement today. The Organization controls the water assets in Mali, Senegal, Mauritania and Guinea and manages them as a “regional common”, transcending national interests.

Our Panel will be privileged to study the experience gained in the Senegal River Basin as the most far reaching example of water cooperation in the world today and to think about ways in which this experience can inspire future arrangements in all parts of the world of tomorrow.

In so doing we have to keep clear focus on the nexus between water and peace. And we should be encouraged by the fact that heads of state and government can agree on ways to resolve trans-boundary water issues. Let me mention a relatively recent example. In March this year the Heads of Government of Egypt, Ethiopia and the Sudan designed a formula to manage the Grand Millennium Dam on the border of Ethiopia and Sudan - a decade long conflict.

The main task of the Global High Level Panel will be to mobilize political will to prevent water-related conflicts and to use water as an entry point for dialogue and, where peace does not exist, for peace negotiations.

There are many technical bodies that are doing excellent technical work on water issues. There is a strong and growing awareness in the general public about the need to protect water as precious public and common good. All these are assets that the Panel can take advantage of. However, its focus should be political and imaginative in the ways in which political will, this most precious asset, can be generated.

The idea of Global Panel was conceived by Strategic Foresight Group, a think tank based in India which crafted the well-known Blue Peace Methodology. It created the Water Cooperation Quotient, which established a strong correlation between trans-boundary water cooperation and regional peace or, conversely, between lack of cooperation and conflict.

While states and their political leaders will mobilize political capital, Strategic Foresight Group will mobilize intellectual capital. Our initiative will therefore be a unique combination of political capital and intellectual capital.

Our Panel is the meeting point where we need to generate imaginative and politically interesting ideas, capable of becoming relevant to policy makers in their quest for peace, stability and prosperity.

It is also a platform to reach out to the international community, help spread awareness of this important work, and actively contribute to the global momentum for the management of water issues in ways that strengthen security and peace.

I thank you for your confidence and I invite you to participate in the work of the panel with the maximum of your great intellectual capabilities and political imagination. We are to work on one of the most exciting and most interesting projects of peace in our era. Let us do the utmost to make our Global High Level Panel on Water and Peace a resounding success.

Thank you.