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**UN-OHRLLS**

**Opening Remarks by**

**Ms. Rabab Fatima**

**High Representative  
and**

**Under-Secretary-General**

**Least Developed Countries, Landlocked Developing Countries  
and Small Island Developing States**

**At the**

**Opening Session of the Ministerial Transport Conference of  
Landlocked Developing Countries**

**Theme: Ashgabat Process: Financing for Better Connectivity**

**15 August 2022, Awaza Congress Centre, Turkmenbashi,  
Turkmenistan**

**10.00-11.20 am Turkmenistan time**

- **Your Excellency Mr. Rashid Meredov, Deputy Chairman of the Cabinet of Ministers, Minister of Foreign Affairs of Turkmenistan**
- **Honorable Ministers,**
- **Excellencies,**
- **Distinguished Delegates,**

It is indeed an honour and privilege for me to address this opening session of this Conference. *[My first major engagement since assuming my post last week – and I consider this to be an auspicious start.]*

Let me begin by commending and thanking the Government of Turkmenistan for hosting this important meeting - and for the warm hospitality and the excellent arrangements made.

I am very pleased to be amongst people today, who are invested in making sustainable transport a reality for all.

Turkmenistan, in particular, has been a leading champion on promoting sustainable transport at the United Nations.

Thank you for the work you do on the international stage and thank you for your leadership in hosting this important conference.

I also take this opportunity to thank our Ministers and other delegates who are here with us today.

Excellencies

Distinguished Delegates,

The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, our shared universal framework of action for eradicating poverty, and to leave no one behind, recognizes that transport connectivity is a key driver for the achievement of the Sustainable Development Goals.

Transit transport is of critical importance for landlocked developing countries (LLDCs) compared to other countries because of their geographical location, and their high dependence on external trade which accounts for about 45% of GDP compared to a world average of 42%. However, critical infrastructure deficiencies, long distances to ports and poor trade facilitation in transit, result in high transport and overall trade costs. The LLDCs pay almost double in trade costs than their neighbouring coastal countries.

The landlocked developing countries, thus require especially robust transportation infrastructure and efficient transit mechanisms in order to effectively participate in regional and global trade.

The Vienna Programme of Action for LLDCs, thus rightly stresses the need to ensure LLDCs' efficient access to, and from the sea.

For a reduction in high transport costs.

Better transit transport infrastructure networks.

Simplified and harmonized rules and regulations.

A transparent exchange of data.

All to ensure increased participation of LLDCs in global trade.

Five years after its adoption, the Midterm Review of the Vienna Programme of Action in 2019, revealed that some progress was made.

But it was not sufficient.

Connectivity remained a major obstacle to enhanced trade integration.

[And] The need had become more urgent for well-functioning corridors, and the development of climate- and disaster-resilient transport infrastructure.

And then came the COVID-19 pandemic.

The pandemic exacerbated LLDCs' pre-existing structural and geographical vulnerabilities.

Further restrictions at borders, and in transit, resulted in even more delays and yet higher transport costs.

Passenger and freight transport slumped, and so did the millions of jobs associated with the sector.

Tourism revenue dropped sharply.

Supply chains were disrupted - including critical supplies, such as of food and medicines.

Understandably, investment in transport infrastructure development and maintenance was diverted towards fighting the pandemic.

And now - far from a return to a pre-COVID world, we are facing even more uncertainty and crisis.

Rising fuel costs, elevated shipping costs and container shortages and high trade costs present new, costly bottlenecks.

These fresh challenges could not have come at a worse time.

Whether it is on road, rail, waterways or air travel, LLDCs find themselves behind the curve compared to their international partners.

The need of the hour is to reverse this situation. Investment and financing gaps must be urgently overcome.

And with that, must come an equally urgent closure of the gender divide in accessing transport. This is a matter of basic human rights and equality.

Excellencies,

We know what the problems are. But what are the solutions?

Let me start with just five.

**First:** There is a need to close the physical transport infrastructure gaps to enhance regional and international transport connectivity of the LLDCs. [i.e.] Complete the missing links.

And expand and upgrade all modes of transport infrastructure.

We have seen how lives change when progress is made.

Central Asian LLDCs are actively developing road and rail transport corridors that will transform the region.

Ethiopia has become a hub for air travel, linking African countries with the rest of the world.

The Kazungula bridge, between Botswana and Zambia, is easing the traffic of goods between these countries and in the wider region.

But much more needs to be done.

**Second:** we must promote soft infrastructure.

That means improving regulatory frameworks and institutional arrangements for enhanced transit.

I wish to encourage LLDCs and transit countries to collaborate more as it results in a win-win situation and transformative changes for all parties. It is particularly important for LLDCs and transit countries to ratify and effectively implement relevant international conventions and regional agreements. One of them, the WTO Trade Facilitation Agreement, is of utmost importance as it will help scale up simplification and harmonization of border procedures and interventions at the regional level especially in light of COVID-19.



In this regard, the 12th WTO Ministerial Conference held in June this year took a historic decision specific to LLDCs. It asked the Trade Facilitation Committee to hold a dedicated session on transit issues annually until the next review of the Trade Facilitation Agreement is completed. The next review of the Trade Facilitation Agreement will be in 2026. These sessions would be an opportunity for LLDCs and WTO Members to find solutions to address transit challenges by LLDCs.

**Third:** More should be done to promote digitalization.

Smart transport and logistics can promote deep integration of new technologies in the transport sector, ensuring safer, easier, and more affordable movement of people and smoother flow of goods.

**Fourth:** Promote clean and efficient transportation through the development of nurturing policies to support the transition.

Sustainability and resilience must be at the heart of this approach, as it will be imperative to ensure more collaboration and partnership between LLDCs and their development partners for technology transfer on mutually agreed terms.

[And] **Finally:** We must recognise that attracting finance, from all possible sources, is fundamental to achieving these first four aims.

That means official development assistance, South-South and Triangular cooperation, public-private partnerships and the private sector. [And] There are some excellent examples of such collaborations in the LLDCs.

The role of multilateral and regional development banks is also important to provide financing and for technical capacity building.

[Excellencies] Taken together these five points can help deliver transport systems that can create new possibilities for the LLDCs.

Underpinning all of this must be a United Nations system that remains committed to delivering on international agreements.

The UN General Assembly has officially decided to hold the Third UN Conference on LLDCs - in 2024.

This will be a vital moment for a reset and a renewed charge towards genuine transport connectivity.

We must use the learning of the last decade and ask the international community in 2024 to renew and enhance their global commitments towards the LLDCs.

These next few days will be an important part of setting that agenda.

We are counting on your expertise to identify solutions and actions to support the sustainable recovery of LLDCs. And to enhance transport connectivity of the LLDCs.

My office is committed to working with you to support your countries as we journey together to a better, more connected future.

I thank you.