**Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe**

**Office of the Co-ordinator of OSCE**
**Economic and Environmental Activities**

**Bonn, 10 May 2005**

# United Nations Convention to Combat Desertification
# Third Session of the Committee for the Review of the Implementation of the Convention (CRIC 3)

## Panel on Migration
## Contribution by the OSCE

Thank you for inviting the OSCE to this conference. Since not all of you might be familiar with the OSCE, I will start by giving you a brief overview of our organization in order to explain how a political security organization can play an important role in addressing a number of issues on the CRIC 3 agenda.

The OSCE is the world largest regional security organization, set up in 1975 through the Helsinki Act. When most people hear the words 'security organisation' they associate this with police, terrorism and military matters. Indeed for the most part up until 1990 this was the OSCE's main work.

Since the early 1990's however, policy-makers have been faced with the complexity of an international security system in which non-traditional security threats to local, national, regional and world-wide scope are increasing in intensity and where many processes are beyond the control of individual governments. Increasingly thus the work of regional security organisations such as the OSCE lies in addressing potential national and transboundary root causes of conflict through a comprehensive and broad security approach.

As such, the OSCE is built on three pillars: The politico–military dimension, the human dimension and the economic and environmental dimension. The objectives for the OSCE in the Economic and Environmental Dimension were laid down in a strategy document. Among others these include:

- → monitoring economic and environmental developments among participating States, with the aim of alerting them to any threat of conflict;
- → facilitating the formulation of economic and environmental policies to promote security, particularly in participating States that are involved in a process of transition;
- → promoting the articulation of and adherence to shared standards and norms for economic and environmental behaviour;
- → developing and intensifying contacts with relevant international organisations

The Co-ordinator, who works under the direct supervision of the Secretary General, is assisted by a 12-person staff. The growth of the co-ordinators office from three to twelve staff in little over two years testifies to the increased interest from member States in economic and environmental issues. In addition the OSCE has 20 field offices in Central Asia, Caucasus, and South-east and Eastern Europe, each of which has at least one economic and environmental officer.

Through their regular communication and contacts with representatives from government, private sector, civil society and the international community, the Economic and Environmental Officers (EEOs) serve as barometers of the local economic and environmental state of affairs in relation to security. Field Missions prepare spot reports on specific economic and environmental issues with security implications. Depending on the issue of concern, the OCEEA serves as a catalyst to contact and inform the appropriate organization with the resources to address the problem.

The OCEEA and OSCE field presences work together in the development of project proposals intended to catalyze country "ownership" in addressing particular economic and/or environmental issues. The OCEEA lends assistance to the EEOs in the presentation, formatting and budgeting of project proposals and supports the field presences in raising funds.

When we look at environmental threats to security the OSCE has recognized that environmental changes and scarcity of natural resources can decisively accelerate or trigger social problems. Environmental stress rarely leads directly to conflict, but may cause tension in already marginalized areas. Land degradation and desertification with its implication for food security is commonly recognized as one such stress factor.

Understanding that UNEP and UNDP already deal with such issues from the development and environment angles, the OSCE decided to co-operate with these agencies to provide a security perspective on such problems. The outcome of this effort is the ENVSEC initiative.

The ENVSEC initiative intends to provide a framework for co-operation on environmental issues across borders and promote peace and stability through environmental co-operation.

The ENVSEC project concept is designed to provide a coherent structure for three key areas of activity: vulnerability assessment and monitoring of environment and security linkages; capacity building and institutional development; and policy development, implementation and advocacy. In a sense one could call it an early warning mechanism, which as I understand has somewhat to do with your thematic topic # 6.

The ENVSEC initiative chose to adopt a regional approach in the belief that many potential sources of environmental conflicts can only be dealt with in their regional context, and that transborder co-operation on such issues can contribute to peace building particularly around scarce common goods. For example the OSCE has assisted participating states in developing a co-ordinated approach with regards to regional co-operation on transboundary water management issues.

Two pilot regions, Central Asia and south-eastern Europe were covered in ENVSEC's first phase, two more, south Caucasus and Eastern Europe, were added in 2004 and we are currently exploring possibilities to extend the ENVSEC approach to the Arctic region.

Numerous themes have emerged as potential security threats in these regions. In central Asia and Caucasus regions transboundary industrial pollution and radioactive waste contamination is one such security threat, that is not yet fully understood and measured and it is for this reason that the ENVSEC initiative has started a number of risk assessments to accurately identify potential contamination. It is important to note here that it often doesn't matter whether there is a risk or not, but whether the population has the perception of a risk, as this is enough to induce inter-ethnic tensions. This is the rationale to undertake such risk assessments and combine these with awareness raising activities.

In the case of Central Asia, land degradation – in other words soil degradation, salinization, erosion and desertification - were identified as potential threats to security. In order to give you some numbers: The land area affected by desertification is significant: ranging from 66. 5% in Kazakhstan to 97.7% in Tajikistan. Clearly such land degradation leads to a greater frequency of natural disasters. Especially in the mountainous regions of Central Asia deforestation and erosion have greatly increased the number of land and mud slides. In light of these dangers, ENVSEC has launched a disaster preparedness project in this region.

Considering that the majority of the population lives in rural areas, the impact of desertification, land degradation and an increasing threat from natural disasters significantly decreases their ability to survive. This may lead to massive out-migration, which may for example increase already existent ethnic friction, a security concern.

This brings us to the topic of migration. This year, the 55 OSCE participating states have decided to devote this year's Flagship event, our Economic Forum, to migration, integration of minorities and demographic transitions. With regard to migration and the environment, we found through our preparatory seminar in Almaty - devoted specifically to this subject - that the connections are numerous and quite complex.

I would like to briefly go through a number of them:

First we have examined the root causes of environmentally induced migration.

## 1. Root Causes of Migration

Poverty and Environment

Perhaps an overarching theme in this respect is the link between poverty and environmental degradation. When the land is not able to sustain agriculture or other economic activity, poverty is the result. Equally, poverty weakens the resilience of populations to reverse environmental degradation. Poverty may indeed worsen the environmental problems since poor people may not have any choice other than further depleting water, forestry and soil resources in their efforts to seek out a living on already marginal lands. Once this situation becomes unmanageable, poor people seek a better life elsewhere, often in cities, putting further pressure on urban eco-systems.

Ground Water / Desertification/ Salinisation

Falling ground water levels, land degradation and desertification pose a threat to the OSCE area, notably Central Asia and the Caucasus region. Armenia's forest coverage has decreased from 13- 8% in the last decade. Research shows that aquifers are being depleted across the OSCE region. Such unsustainable practices cause a "bubble economy" where an increasing output of agricultural produce is being supported by pumping dry the water resources and

deforesting the land for agricultural purposes. As the water dries up and erosion increases, agricultural output and people's income decreases, ultimately leading to rural economic collapse. This was demonstrated as early as in the 1930s by the Dust Bowl devastation of the Great Plains which drove 3 million American farmers to leave their farms for California.

The Aral Sea disaster (as a result of water over usage by the cotton industry) is a more recent example in the OSCE area of unsustainable agricultural policy. In Central Asia in general, it is estimated that 90% of the regions crops are produced on irrigated land. Most of this is still cotton, a particularly thirsty crop, which contributes to soil degradation and reduces biodiversity, which weakens ecosystem resilience.

Natural Disasters

Another issue posing a threat to populations in the OSCE area are natural disasters. The Red Cross and Red Crescent World Disaster Report 2004 concludes that both hydro-meteorological and geophysical disasters have become more common, increasing by 68 per cent and 62 per cent respectively over the decade. In the OSCE area, heat waves, floods, fires and extreme weather have made headlines in the US and Europe. However, it is the populations in countries with weaker economies that are hit the hardest. Central Asia is one of the more earthquake prone regions in the world. Increased desertification, deforestation, land degradation and climate change exacerbate the frequency at which natural disasters occur.

**Case study: Deforestation**

Deforestation continues at around 9 million hectares per year. Forested lands in Central Asia for example, especially in the foothills of the mountains and along the river ways, have shrunk to less than a quarter other their original extent. This deforestation has multiple effects:

-agricultural output decreases as fertile soil is washed away
-desertification advances
-the frequency of landslides increases
-the frequency of flooding increases as rainfall is not absorbed by the soil
-nutrient rich sediments clog dams which increase dredging costs,
-natural water filtration ability decreases
-soil salinisation increases, ultimately leading to desertification.

Natural disasters inevitably cause 'unregulated' migration and increase the number of internally displaced.

Industrial / Nuclear waste

Purely man made environmental disasters can also have long lasting devastating effects forcing people to leave their homes, as demonstrated by, the Chernobyl nuclear accident. In the OSCE area there are many obsolete industrial installations and hazardous waste dumps that pose a threat to the surrounding population and their environment. Toxins can spread through the air, water and food chain. Even if they do not directly impact on human health they can render agricultural land unusable, prompting out-migration.

Climate Change

Climate change adds another, potentially devastating and not yet fully understood, component to the problem of environmental migrants. The Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) noted in 1990 that the greatest effect of climate change could be human migration. Climate change has the potential to exacerbate several of the different factors causing environmentally induced migration described above, such as droughts, floods and extreme weather. In addition to this, rising sea levels will cause further loss of land and will force people to resettle away from coastal areas.

Having examined some of the root causes of environmentally induced migration I should now like to illustrate some of the consequences.

**2. Environmental Refugees**

Various international agencies note growing numbers of displaced people as a result of environmental problems such as drought, soil degradation, desertification, deforestation, and natural and man-made disasters. Yet there is still far less attention devoted to these kinds of migrants than to those forced to flee because of political instability, ethnic conflict or economic collapse.

The Red Cross and Red Crescent World Disasters Report 2003 estimates that 25 million people have become 'environmental migrants'. The uncertainty about the numbers stems from the difficulty to assess in what ways environmental degradation actually influences a person's decision to migrate. Environmental factors are closely intertwined with other factors such as poverty, institutional constraints, population pressures and political instability – all of which are given as reasons for migration. Recent research undertaken by Médecins Sans Frontièrs of people in Karakalpakstan migrating out of the area affected by the Aral Sea disaster showed that although people had moved from the area due to draughts and increased difficulties to sustain a living on their land as a consequence of the Aral Sea desiccation, the migrants themselves considered economic reasons as being the most important in forcing them to migrate.

Globally, 135 million people already face threat of desertification and another 550 million are subject to chronic water shortage. This number will rise if the predictions of global warming come true (sea level rise, disruption of yearly rains, droughts).

Many more come on top of this figure if one takes into account the poverty stricken areas of the world. Many poor people live on agricultural areas with very low potential, of which 57% try to survive in areas prone to erosion, droughts, floods and other environmental hazards. Most of the population increases over the next years will come from communities living in such marginal environments. These people, with little to lose, may subsequently be driven to the cities in search for a share of the growing national wealth. This puts further pressure on urban ecosystems.

The existence of environmental refugees was first recognized and categorized in 1985 in a United Nations Environment Program publication, "Environmental Refugees". The data and conclusions were drawn from United Nations' research, particularly from the UN Disaster Relief Agency. The publication defined environmental refugees as "...those people who have been forced to leave their traditional habitat, temporarily or permanently, because of a marked environmental disruption (natural and/or triggered by people) that jeopardized their existence and/or seriously affected the quality of their life."

This definition does not correspond to the official definition of "refugees" by the 1951 UN Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees, which protects only those who have crossed an international border and have a "well-founded fear" of being persecuted. The plight of millions of forced environmental migrants does not fulfil the second of these criteria and often not the first one either, as many people move within their country. This exclusion raises serious ethical and legal questions. Some experts opine that adding environmental migrants to the definition of refugees would be unhelpful, as it would overload the existing refugee

apparatus. The result is that no UN agency is currently mandated to help them. National governments are technically responsible, but millions go unaided.

**3. Migration impact on Environment**

To complete the circle, I would like to now turn to the impact migrating people have on their environment. Mediterranean countries are experiencing an increase in wild fires as a consequence of farmland being left unattended by people moving to seek a more prosperous life in the cities. Equally, when the movement of people from rural to urban areas outpaces urban infrastructure in terms of waste management, water supply, sanitation and transport, the implications for local health and welfare become serious.

Refugees also have an environmental impact. Humanitarian assistance to displaced people can proceed without sufficient attention to the potentially avoidable environmental impacts of their operations, even though these can play a role in driving future conflicts. The majority of the world's refugees are found in marginal regions of poor, developing countries. Here, the "footprint" or environmental impact of their activities is often of great magnitude and long duration. Collecting shelter materials and firewood can cause serious deforestation and soil erosion. Water contamination within the camps results from overuse and contamination due to pollution and the presence of livestock near water sources.

Refugee related impacts can lead to tension with the local community, as competition for resources intensifies and refugees new to the area are unfamiliar with traditions or laws protecting wildlife or sacred sites.

In conclusion, we can see that environmental degradation has serious consequences. On the one hand competition for resources increases, which may augment political tensions. On the other hand environmental degradation forces people to leave their century old homes in the search for opportunities elsewhere. This migratory pressure can be reduced through awareness raising and cross border co-operation on issues of common concern.

Among others, for these reasons we have developed ENVSEC and are in the process of starting a program on landslide and erosion prevention by planting trees in affected danger zones. This is actually being done in co-operation with the UNCCD and is being implemented as a Synergies (i.e. synergies between the three Rio Conventions) project.

The OSCE, as a political security organization stands ready to support your efforts and if we decide to work all together on these issues, we can build the necessary bridges towards a peaceful and sustainable future.

Thank you.