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**Statement by H.E. Mr. Mukhtar Babayev  
Minister of Ecology and Natural Resources of the Republic of Azerbaijan**

**at a United Nations Security Council Ministerial-level Arria-formula Meeting on  
“Protection of civilians: Achieving a better protection of water-related essential services and  
infrastructure for the civilian population during armed conflicts”**

***22 March 2023***

Mr. Chairman,

At the outset, I would like to thank Mozambique and Switzerland for having convened this Arria-formula meeting on an important and pressing topic.

The international community, including the Security Council, has paid an increased attention to the protection of the environment and water-related essential services and infrastructure in situations of armed conflict as well as in conflict prevention and resolution and post-conflict recovery and peace-building.

Water is indispensable for the survival of the humanity. Attacks against and limitations of access to water resources during armed conflicts are frequently used as a method of warfare, including with a view to creating humanitarian crisis, starving civilian populations or changing the demographic composition of a particular territory.

International humanitarian law provides for the protection of access to water in the context of the limitations imposed on military operations during armed conflicts, as well as regulates the use of water resources and the access to water in occupied territories. Furthermore, it is recognized that the right to clean drinking water and sanitation is a human right, bringing into operation the relevant international legal instruments.

Mr. Chairman,

During its nearly 30-year unlawful occupation of the territories of Azerbaijan, along with numerous atrocity crimes, the total ethnic cleansing of these territories and the destruction and looting of Azerbaijani cultural and historical heritage and hundreds of cities, towns and villages there, Armenia caused widespread, long-term and severe damage to the environment of my country, with destroyed forests, burned and degraded soil, pillaged and destroyed water infrastructure and polluted water resources.

Armenia neglected and mismanaged water infrastructure, provoking a humanitarian crisis as Azerbaijanis living in areas adjacent to the formerly occupied territories were deliberately denied access to portable water and water for agricultural purposes.

Furthermore, Armenia supported and facilitated the overexploitation of mineral resources in the formerly occupied territories. The construction and operation of mines and the use of unsustainable mining and quarrying processes led to widespread deforestation, land degradation and devastating environmental harm.

In its April 2022 report, the UNEP Environmental Scoping Mission to the Conflict-Affected Territories of Azerbaijan noted, in particular, that: “it appears that mining and quarrying operations were generally conducted with inadequate environmental oversight and supervision, including a lack of effluent treatment and site rehabilitation.”

UNEP also documented evidence of “instream quarrying of gravel and sand, which is one of the most aggressive and destructive forms of quarrying.” These aggressive and unsustainable measures predictably resulted in the chemical pollution of water, soil, and biota.

Despite the end of the conflict, depredatory and uncontrolled exploitation of mineral deposits in the area of the temporary deployment of peacekeepers on the territory of Azerbaijan has not stopped; on the contrary, it has expanded even further, causing further damage to the environment, polluting the territory and destroying the fragile ecosystem.

This led to peaceful protests by eco-activists on the Lachin-Khankendi road, which started last year on December 12 and continue to date, as the relevant State organs of Azerbaijan are still denied access to the sites in question to conduct inspections of the mineral deposits of concern and assess the potential environmental damage and risks, including the impact on underground and surface water resources.

Mining operations in Armenia continue to pollute transboundary rivers flowing into Azerbaijan, including the Okhchuchay River, which is a key source of drinking and irrigation water in southwestern Azerbaijan.

In addition, the large-scale mine contamination of the liberated territories limits our ability to widely carry out monitoring and rehabilitation work. In this sense, Azerbaijan sees a direct link between SDGs and demining since mines slow down the reconstruction process in the liberated territories and the return of IDPs. Azerbaijan actively promotes the initiative of launching the 18<sup>th</sup> SDG on demining.

During the 44-day war in the fall of 2020, Armenia also targeted essential civilian infrastructure, repeatedly launching missile attacks on Mingachevir—an Azerbaijani city located approximately 40 kilometers away from the zone of hostilities—which hosts a key water reservoir and electricity plant. Had Armenian missiles succeeded in hitting the facilities, they would have caused devastating floods stretching over 240 kilometers and deprived the population of access to drinking water and electricity.

Earlier this year, Azerbaijan commenced the inter-State arbitration under the Bern Convention on the Conservation of European Wildlife and Natural Habitats. This landmark arbitration case aims to hold Armenia accountable for its extensive destruction of Azerbaijan's environment and biodiversity during its nearly thirty years of unlawful occupation of the internationally recognized territories of Azerbaijan.

There can be no durable peace if the environment that sustains livelihoods is destroyed, polluted and barbarically exploited. It is critical to protect the environment and ensure the provision of safe water, in peacetime and during war, and to cooperate to combat environmental crimes and the illegal exploitation of natural resources.

Thank you.