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ECONOMIC AND SOCIAL COMMISSION FOR WESTERN ASIA

Statement of

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To be checked against delivery.

Excellencies ,

United Nations friends and colleagues,

Honored Guests,

Good Morning and a warm welcome to you all to the UN House in Beirut at this extraordinary moment in the history of the Arab region.

A special welcome to colleagues from the 22 UN agencies participating in this RCM, to our partners from the Region, and to colleagues from headquarters: John Hendra, the Assistant Secretary General of UN Women, and Naheed Haque, the Deputy Executive Coordinator of UNV, who are joining us for the first time.

To the League of Arab States, and her Excellency Dr Bahous, your presence here is, as usual, highly valued. We congratulate the League of Arab States, and Arab citizens at large, on the recent election of His Excellency, Dr Nabil El Araby, as the new Secretary General. I also take this opportunity to express my appreciation to His Excellency, Mr Amr Mousa, for his diligent pursuit of an Arab renaissance throughout his tenure, and for his constructive engagement and cooperation with the United Nations.

Friends and colleagues,

When we met last November our focus was Arab youth. We expressed concern over their deprivation of meaningful opportunities. But we also saw great potential in them as future leaders and a powerful engine for progress and socio-economic development. We resolved to work with them and help them fulfill this potential. We also agreed to expand our partnerships to include, in addition to government interlocutors, civil society organizations and the private sector, two pivotal players and agents of change in our societies. The role of the RCM in facilitating such regional partnerships is unique; and the formation of the Civil Society Advisory Group is just one step in that direction.

This is not our usual RCM meeting. Hence we will not go over the substantive content and follow up on decisions taken during our last meeting. Those will be discussed in detail at the 16th RCM meeting in November.

As for our meeting today, I hope that our deliberations will result in a shared understanding of the magnitude of events unleashed in December 2010 and of the tremendous challenges and opportunities that are unfolding. This should lead us to a collective vision of how we, at the United Nations, need to adapt in order to maintain our credibility and relevance, and to proactively help our countries and peoples steer through this turbulent yet promising period. It would be useful if we could also agree on initiatives that we can jointly pursue to responsibly carry out our mandates in this rapidly changing landscape, launching, as we move ahead, a

healthy dialogue and building on complementarities amongst us, and between the United Nations and other actors in the region.

Colleagues,

I cannot think of any other point in recent Arab history when a United Nations Regional Coordination Meeting has been more pertinent and more challenging. The Arab spring has begun. Arab societies are publicly demanding accountability to them above all else. This is an intrinsic part of their right to lead dignified lives as citizens rather than subjects. Given that the current process of transition is yet to mature, eventual outcomes are hard to foretell. What is evident at this point is that the barriers of fear have been shattered, and that the region will not regress into the political and economic stalemate that characterized it prior to December 17, 2010. Citizens are now empowered as they lay claim to rights long denied. The change is irreversible.

As United Nations Organizations we have responded to the uprisings in a number of ways. Political and diplomatic missions were promptly dispatched by the Secretary General. The UNDG were quick to revise their strategy for the region in order to assess and address emerging challenges and opportunities. With the support of Mona Hammam, Deputy Regional Director of RBAS, and the UNDP Egypt country office, ESCWA organized an extensive two day brainstorming in Cairo with representatives of the youth of Arab Freedom Squares. We are also launching three new flagship publications that will explore options for the region and reflect the priorities of the youth. Internally, we have revisited our work program to ensure that the emerging needs and issues are effectively addressed through the development of integrated programs on social protection, good governance and environmental sustainability.

We have all done well. But maybe not enough. So far we have focused, mainly though not exclusively, on supporting the democratic transition in countries where the uprisings have successfully led to a regime change such as Tunisia and Egypt. But three other groups of countries have emerged and they also require our urgent attention and constructive involvement. These include: countries that have pledged to undertake a series of political and socio-economic reforms; countries where the political struggles have degenerated into state led violence and an increased potential for civil conflict; and countries where the political establishment deflected demands by its citizens for greater democratization and rights, through increased social and financial transfers. The regional scene is further complicated by the continued Israeli occupation of Palestinian and Arab lands and the disastrous toll it has taken on lives and livelihoods as well as on regional stability and prosperity.

There is no one solution that can successfully be applied to all of these countries. Each will warrant its own specific set of support measures. The only common denominator would be a vision of societies based on the full respect of fundamental freedoms, human rights and personal dignity.

Finally, I believe the time has come for us to fine-tune our general approach in terms of both substance and process. We need to articulate a new development paradigm that fully captures the reciprocal impact of growth and development, governance variables, environmental sustainability, political systems and decision making processes.

More critically, we need to build on the rich resources and inspiring resourcefulness of the people of this region. For it is home to some of the most notable and inspiring intellectuals, activists and relevant experts. Our role, as United Nations organizations, is not to replace these significant sources of knowledge but to facilitate their vital contribution during this transitional period and beyond, as countries redefine their national priorities. I hope that at the end of this RCM we will have forged a common understanding of some of the basic means through which we can collectively support the fulfillment of the promise that this Arab spring holds.