Statement by Ms Áile Javo, President of the Saami Council,  
on the occasion of the Eight Ministerial Meeting of the Arctic Council  
Giron 15. May 2013

Mr. Chair, Ministers, Indigenous leaders, brothers and sisters of the Arctic. Welcome to Sápmi and the town of Giron, in the midst of Saami homeland.

First of all, the Saami Council would like to congratulate the Swedish Chairmanship on its able leadership of the Arctic Council. We welcome the ongoing process of strengthening the Arctic Council, and we appreciate that the unique role of the permanent participants is recognized and valued.

We welcome the latest knowledge about the Arctic presented in the assessments and reports prepared by the Working Groups and Task Forces for this Ministerial meeting. We also welcome the initiatives regarding corporate social responsibility while we are somewhat concerned about the increased focus on business and industrial development – we have to be very careful in order to conduct the cooperation with the business the right way, also for the indigenous peoples and our economies and respecting the indigenous peoples’ human rights.

We would like to emphasise that the increasing focus on the private sector’s responsibility to respect human rights does not mean that state responsibility diminish correspondingly. Corporate responsibility does not change the fact that the states with Saami population have the ultimate legal responsibility to respect, protect and fulfil Saami human rights.
Here in the Giron area, industrial development – in particular mining – poses a tremendous challenge to the local Saami reindeer herding people. In our delegation, we have local reindeer herders with us that can witness to the fact that corporate responsibility can be a two-edge sword. The Swedish government says that we expect the mining industry to behave responsibly when operating in the Saami areas. But at the same time, the mining company says we follow Swedish law. Here in the Giron area, corporate responsibility equals no responsibility.

Mr Chair, Sweden’s interest in the survival of reindeer husbandry and the mining industry respectively is reflected in resources spent. In 2012, Sweden spent SEK 3.5 billion (USD 500 million) to promote mining activities in the Saami areas. In the same year, the Sweden invested zero dollars in taking measures in protecting the rights of Saami reindeer herding communities.

The fact that Saami and other Arctic indigenous peoples’ areas continues to be exploited without their consent implies that the colonisation of Sápmi and other indigenous peoples’ territories is not a practice of the past but very much a continuing process of today.

On this background, Mr Chair, the Saami Council is still prepared to contribute to the work of the Arctic Council, also in addressing the concerns we as Indigenous Peoples raise at this table.

Having extended our gratitude to Sweden for its leadership over the past two years, the Saami Council looks forward to the Canadian chairmanship and holds great expectations for its program and priorities. We appreciate that Canada from the outset has made a point of involving the Saami in their preparations for the Chairmanship. We trust that this cooperation will continue and stand ready to contribute to highlighting the human dimension in the Arctic Council’s work during Canada’s Chairmanship. Thank you for your attention, Mr Chair.