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Senior Arctic Officials Meeting of the Arctic Council
6 November, 2001, Espoo, Finland

Ms Hannele Pokka
Governor of Lapland
Chair of the Northern Forum

REPORT ON THE NORTHERN FORUM GENERAL ASSEMBLY IN EDMONTON, CANADA, OCTOBER 29-31, 2001

The Northern Forum represents 26 sub-regional administrations in 9 northern countries. Half of the member regions are located in Russia.

The General Assembly, held last week in Edmonton, Canada, was the Fifth General Assembly of the Northern Forum. Previous meetings were held in Lapland, in the Republic of Sakha, Russia, in Hokkaido, Japan, in Tromsø, Norway and the inaugural meeting in Alaska, USA.

I was honoured to be chosen as the chair of the Forum for next two-year term. The vice chairs will be held by the President of Sakha and the Governor of St. Petersburg from Russia, the Governor of Heilongjiang, China and the Governor of Alaska, USA. We five together form the Executive Committee that holds responsibility for the practical activities between the general assembly meetings.

In addition to project reporting and approving new projects there were two main topics to discuss. Firstly promoting activities to develop sustainable economic development in the northern regions, and to strengthen co-operation with business organisations and companies. The second main topic concerned co-operation between the Northern Forum and the Arctic Council. The conclusions of the meeting can be found summarised in the Declaration of the meeting.

The meeting had the privilege to have an address by Ambassador Peter Stenlund, Chair of the Arctic Council. For background purposes was delivered Professor Oran Young’s paper headed “Can the Arctic Council and the Northern Forum Find Common Ground? A Political Analysis” that is available in this meeting, as well. I would like to thank Mr Stenlund for his exhaustive speech in the meeting. This indicates that the Chair is well acquainted with sub-regional points of view, as well as attempting to and indeed very well succeeding to identify the common interests between the sub-regional and the national levels, and between these two organisations.
The declaration and a separate resolution concerning the Relationship between the Northern Forum and the Arctic Council including for instance the following:

The Forum seeks to develop a working relationship with the Arctic Council by
• continuing joint project implementation
• participating in the Council’s meetings
• inviting the Council representatives to the Forum’s meetings
• promoting better co-ordination among regional and sub-national actors, and
• joining with the Council to raise global awareness of Arctic and northern issues, in order to address issues best resolved in national capitals and international arenas.

The Forum indicates a particular interest in co-operating with the Council on sustainable development, including its economic, social and cultural aspects.

The Forum will also promote closer collaboration with the Council regarding environmental issues, particular at the project level, and regarding international emergencies and disasters.

In order to concretise and provide background for these efforts, the Secretariat of the Northern Forum has prepared a Position Paper and a separate Summary that are available in this meeting.

In this connection I would like to refer to Professor Oran Young’s aforementioned paper. I highly appreciate his comprehensive examination by viewing with a researcher’s eyes and with strong scientific basis and grasp. He, as a scientist has succeeded in crystallising the essential points of view. To my mind his paper can be used as excellent scientific background and a basis for further discussions and measures strengthening co-operation with these two organisations but also in general Arctic co-operation.

Unfortunately, the General Assembly of the Forum was held only few days ago, having its closing session last Wednesday. Therefore it has not been possible to send the Forum’s documents, and Professor Young’s paper to you in advance. They have only been available on the table yesterday and today.

Therefore, I propose on behalf of the Northern Forum that The Senior Arctic Officials’ meeting delivers to the Chair and the Secretariat of the Council a mandate to continue discussions with the Northern Forum on concrete co-operation, and to return with the issue in the next Senior Arctic Officials’ meeting in May 2002, Oulu, Finland.

I also propose that the Working Groups of the Council discuss the co-operation at the working group and project levels in order to provide ideas and concrete measures to the Senior Arctic Officials meeting.

In addition on behalf of the Northern Forum I propose that the members of the Senior Arctic Officials and the working groups in respective member states discuss the issue together with their sub-regional representatives.
As far as the Northern Forum is concerned, I assure you that we as an organisation and as northern sub-regions will do our utmost to identify common interests and create concrete forms, e.g. projects that will be of common interest. We are not asking for economic support. We are able to fund our own part in the co-operation. In addition, the Northern Forum does possess priceless expertise and contacts of the inhabitants, organisations and administrations of the respective regions for the use of Arctic co-operation.

Concerning contacts and information exchange between sub-regional administrations and national or federal administrations, the Forum will be active in future, too. I would like to mention as an example a meeting in Moscow in March this year with Mr. Igor Ivanov, Minister of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation. The meeting was arranged by our Russian member regions. The vice chair regions of Lapland, Alaska and Hokkaido, Japan were represented, too. Mr Ivanov was informed of the Forum’s activities. He gave a very positive response. I feel that he highly appreciates the role of northern sub-regional co-operation and the Northern Forum, as well. The meeting with Minister Ivanov encourages us to have similar meetings with national leaders of other states having members in the Northern Forum. In future we hope to have the opportunity to arrange these meetings together with single members of the Senior Arctic Officials.

A question, that I suppose will arise, is the fact that the Forum does not have regional members from Iceland and Denmark. As far as concerns Iceland, the reason has been very simple. The Northern Forum is the organisation of the regional administration, and in Iceland there have not been regional administrations between the national and local levels in the sense of the Northern Forum bylaws. This year, however, the Northern Forum made an amendment of its bylaws allowing Icelandic regional or local co-operative entities to be approved as members. Discussions are already underway with representatives of northern Iceland.

Considering member regions of Japan, China and Mongolia of the Forum that are not members of the Arctic Council, I see them as very potential partners for the Arctic Council as they already have a lot of common interest with northern issues. These countries are also potential observers of the Council.

To the end, I like to thank the Chair and all the Senior Arctic Officials for giving to the Northern Forum and to me personally an opportunity to inform you about the General Assembly meeting.

As you know, in its program for 2000-2002, the Finnish Chairmanship of the Arctic Council states following: “The Arctic Council should strengthen co-operation at regional level” and “Co-operation between the Council and the Forum should be enhanced”. This occasion today very well carries out and continues those aims. We are already on the way to make co-operation, only mentioning a joint project of Sustainable Tourism. We need further steps.
On behalf of the Northern Forum and from sub-regional point of view I hope that we together are able to proceed with concrete steps toward more intensified cooperation between the Council and the Forum, and in general between the sub-regional administrations and national level administrations.