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Statement by Mr Erkki Tuomioja, Minister for Foreign Affairs of Finland

Mr Chairman, Colleagues, Distinguished Participants, Ladies and Gentlemen,

First of all I would like to congratulate the Russian Federation for its successful chairmanship of the Arctic Council and for the excellent arrangements at this ministerial meeting.

In 2002, at the World Summit for Sustainable Development heads of state and government adopted the target of significantly reducing the rate of biodiversity loss by 2010. Unfortunately all recent assessments, including the Millennium Ecosystem Assessment of 2005, show evidence of continuing, and even accelerating, loss of biodiversity and related decline in ecosystem services globally.

Negative impacts are taxing ecosystems also in the Arctic. Among the many pressures and underlying causes of this situation climate change is the big unknown factor in assessing the vulnerability of arctic biodiversity. As has been shown, it is difficult to predict whether climate change will lead to decreased or increased contaminant levels in Arctic ecosystems in the long term.

I would like to thank Russia for its successful efforts to stress sustainable development in the work of the Arctic Council. The Arctic Council Sustainable Development Program is today being implemented through several concrete projects. This programme is our common commitment as Arctic countries to the global process of sustainable development.

The Arctic Human Development Report (AHDR) is still one of the cornerstones of this work. This unique report is a necessary knowledge base when preparing our projects and joint activities. The report is also a useful medium for spreading information about issues and living conditions in the Arctic regions. For these reasons the report should be translated into other languages in order to utilize its instructive value. I hope that the Finnish and Russian translations will be followed by more translations in the near future.

Other important follow-ups of the AHDR are the development of the Arctic Social Indicators and the Arctic Information Technology Assessment (AICTA).

Approximately four million people live in the Arctic regions, including both indigenous and local people. The Arctic regions and peoples are today facing rapid environmental changes. That is why we need to continue to strengthen our knowledge of socio-economic and human development in these territories.

The Arctic region is also seen today as a rich reserve of natural resources for the rest of the world, but it is wrong to think that climate change would be beneficial by opening new avenues for exploitation of natural resources such as oil and gas. The Arctic ecosystem is fragile and excessive economic activity could disrupt its sensitive balance. Moreover, traditional means of livelihood, such as reindeer husbandry and fishing, might suffer.

I noted at our last ministerial meeting in Reykjavik that the Arctic Climate Impact Assessment should serve as a powerful wake-up call. Two years after that we should be even more concerned about the findings of ACIA and the findings of other recent surveys, which show that climate change is progressing faster and with even more serious implications here in the Arctic than we have hitherto recognised. The melting of the polar ice cap and of glaciers can have catastrophic consequences.

On the positive side, an increase in accessibility and maritime activity will lead to opportunities for social and economic development through increased

investment and infrastructure. Thus, climate change has become a major factor shaping the future of the Arctic.

In relation to increased maritime activity, the Arctic Marine Shipping Assessment (AMSA), with the United States, Canada and Finland as lead countries, is a timely new assessment covering the period 2005 to 2008. It is important to increase understanding of maritime activities and the ways in which they will develop in the future and what impact any increased activity will have on the environment, economies and societies in the Arctic. I urge all Arctic countries to contribute to this assessment.

The conclusion to be drawn from what I have just said should be that the Arctic Council should continue the work on climate change by following the footsteps outlined in the ACIA and ACIA policy recommendation document. We have to keep improving our understanding of this complex phenomenon and its implications. It is therefore essential that we maintain a adequate research and monitoring infrastructure in the Arctic region.

I would also like to mention that my American colleague and myself came here straight from the inaugural meeting of the European Union – United States high-level dialogue on climate change, clean energy and sustainable development, which took place in Helsinki on 24-25 October. It was very encouraging new turn in the European Union – United States dialogue in these issues, based on the common objectives of reducing greenhouse gas emissions, improving the global environment, enhancing energy security and cutting air pollution.

The chair has also chosen environmental protection as a topic in this meeting. I am pleased to note that the Finnish-led assessment report "AMAP Assessment 2006: Acidifying Pollutants, Arctic Haze, and Acidification in the Arctic", as well

as the shorter complementary overview report, were ready just in time for the present Ministerial Meeting and have been distributed to the delegations.

Ladies and gentlemen,

Before concluding, let me briefly turn your attention to the Northern Dimension. The renewal of the Northern Dimension policy is one of the priorities of the Finnish EU Presidency this autumn.

The Northern Dimension Ministerial Meeting last November agreed that the Northern Dimension will be transformed into a common policy involving the European Union, Iceland, Norway, and the Russian Federation. This means that the EU and all the countries in the region will jointly agree on the objectives and mechanisms of the renewed Northern Dimension. It was also decided that the Northern Dimension will be a regional expression of the sectoral interaction between the EU and Russia in the fields of economic cooperation, justice and home affairs, external security, and research, education and culture. The Northern Dimension will also continue to focus on other issues of special relevance to the north, such as the environment, health and social matters and issues concerning indigenous peoples.

The Northern Dimension Senior Officials Meeting in Imatra on the 22nd of September concluded work on a draft framework document for the new Northern Dimension policy and discussed its future implementation. The next step will be to prepare a political declaration to accompany the framework document. Our aim is that these new documents will be adopted on a high political level this autumn during the Finnish EU Presidency.

As Canada and the United States will continue to be observers in the new Northern Dimension Policy, all members of the Arctic Council will be involved in

the policy. It will strengthen the commitment of all partners to the Northern Dimension and thus give an impetus to enhanced practical cooperation. The need for cooperation among the countries of the North remains great or is even greater than it used to be. Many of the challenges, and also the opportunities, of the North are too large for individual countries to handle alone. Increased cooperation within the framework of the Northern Dimension benefits the international community as a whole. This is especially true in the context of the Arctic environment and climate issues.

The northern regional councils (The Arctic Council, The Council of the Baltic Sea States, The Barents Euro-Arctic Council, The Nordic Council of Ministers) have an important role to play in the new Northern Dimension policy. They can identify needs for development and co-operation in their respective areas and support project implementation in different ways. The European Commission has been a member of the Barents Euro-Arctic Council and the Council of the Baltic Sea States since these two councils were established in the early 1990s. Finland considers it important, that the Commission will be engaged in the work of the Arctic Council in the future.

Finally, I would like once more to extend my thanks and appreciation to the Russian Federation for its admirable chairmanship.

Thank you.