

International Community must urge the Iranian Government to resolve grave environmental problems of Lake Urmia

Brussels, 29 October 2013 – The Unrepresented Nations and Peoples Organization (UNPO) is calling on the international community to exercise pressure on the Iranian authorities to urgently take action against the drying-up of Lake Urmia (also spelt Oroumiyeh or Urūmiyeh) in Southern Azerbaijan, Iran.

Lake Urmia, which lies in the North-West part of Iran, is considered to be the largest lake in the whole Middle East (with a surface of about 6000 km<sup>2</sup>). However, since 1999, the water level in the lake has generally been declining, drying out 75% of the lake. The decline is linked to both continuous droughts and the construction of 47 reservoirs and dams on the lake's tributaries under the pretence of agricultural development. In effect, flow of fresh water to the lake has been halted.

Environmental experts have repeatedly warned the government of Iran and the international community about the continuously declining water level in Lake Urmia, which leads to increased salinity, the destruction of the lake's ecosystem and higher occurrences of wind-blown salt-storms in the region. This devastating process also seriously affect agriculture, which relies on the lake's water to survive, as well as the lives of the local population – a majority of which are ethnic Azerbaijanis who have witnessed continued discrimination from Iranian authorities.

The issue of Lake Urmia is decidedly politicized, especially when taking into account the fact that the salt remaining from its drying up is incredibly rich in Uranium. Great risks exist of seeing the local population scattered away from their homeland as their habitat no longer allows them to survive – all because of the authorities' (mis)management of Lake Urmia's ecosystem.

The Iranian authorities have established a special commission to address Lake Urmia's problems and have provided financial support for the improvement of the ecological situation in Southern Azerbaijan. The United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) has allocated a special fund for the prevention of the drying up of Lake Urmia. Although encouraging, these steps have not been able to stop the disastrous environmental situation in Southern Azerbaijan from worsening. Thus, UNPO urges the international community to put pressure on the government of Iran to draw serious attention to Southern Azerbaijan's environmental issue, guaranteeing the Azerbaijani minority a safe and secure environment in which to live.

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