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Opening Speech by President of the Republic of Finland Tarja Halonen at the Baltic Sea Action Summit in Helsinki on 10 February 2010

It gives me great pleasure to welcome you all to the Baltic Sea Action Summit. We have a common challenge to tackle and we should find the best way to do it.

Our common sea is and has always been close to our hearts. It is a route for travel, trade and culture. It connects our peoples together in many ways. Unfortunately, decades of exploitation and sheer irresponsibility have taken their toll on its vulnerable ecosystem. Today some of the richest and most environmentally conscious countries on earth live on the shores of one of the world's most polluted seas.

It is clear that something has to be done – and quickly. The initiative that we launched last year - together with Prime Minister Matti Vanhanen and Chairman Ilkka Herlin of the Baltic Sea Action Group - is based on the idea of public-private partnership. We called on the Heads of State and Government, cities and other public authorities, international organisations, business representatives and non-governmental organisations of all the Baltic Sea states to join our efforts.

I am very happy that you all decided to come. Your participation makes this a new kind of Summit. When this model of cooperation works so well for the Baltic Sea, it can be used elsewhere to solve environmental problems.

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The need for action has been recognized by all of our countries. The HELCOM Baltic Sea Action Plan - adopted in 2007 - set the objective of restoring the good condition of the sea by 2021. The Plan addresses the major environmental problems of the Baltic Sea.

The EU's Northern Dimension Policy and the Union's recently adopted Strategy for the Baltic Sea Region provide us with tools also in protection of the marine environment.

We want to give our support to these decisions and actions. It is clear that we need the cooperation of all the countries in the region.

It is important that we set ambitious goals for our cooperation. Working together to solve environmental problems should enhance also our broader cooperation. Progress has been made in bringing down barriers between our countries, but we should continue to strive for more positive interaction.

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I thank you very much for the important commitments that you have already made for the Baltic Sea environment. The Government of Finland has made its own commitments, and I give my full support to them. In addition to this, I am committed to continue personally my work for the Baltic Sea.

- My first commitment has been to convene this Baltic Sea Action Summit, together with the Prime Minister and the Baltic Sea Action Group.
- My second commitment is to continue promoting the Baltic Sea Action Summit process for a cleaner Baltic Sea also after the Helsinki Summit together with the business community and non-governmental organisations.
- Thirdly, I will emphasise the implementation of the HELCOM Baltic Sea Action Plan in contacts with my Colleagues around the Baltic Sea.
- Fourthly, I will encourage members of Parliament and other elected bodies as well as those participating in electoral campaigns to work for a cleaner Baltic Sea.
- Fifth, I call on the young generation to join our efforts and I will give my support to their activities to make the Baltic Sea healthy again. - When you entered the Finlandia Hall today, you saw a very special piece of art. It is a map of the Baltic Sea region put together by young people from Finland, Russia and Poland. They broadened their Baltic Sea experiences last summer in a workshop in Helsinki, and wanted to share those experiences in a visual form.
- I finally propose for your consideration an annual Baltic Sea Day to raise awareness, to strengthen our commitments and to check how our process continues.

Let us see our work also in the global context. Let us make the Baltic Sea a sea of sustainable development. We don't expect miracles but serious work by all of us.