Statement by H.E. Mr. Azad Rahimov, Minister for Youth and Sports of the Republic of Azerbaijan

at the United Nations General Assembly on agenda item 11: Sport for Peace and Development
20 October 2014, New York

Mr. President,
Mr. Secretary-General,
Excellencies,
Ladies and gentlemen,

At the outset on behalf of the delegation of the Republic of Azerbaijan, I extend our greetings to all delegations and wish you continued success in your endeavours.

Today is a great day for Sport and Peace and we welcome this opportunity to address the General Assembly.

Sport is among the key factors contributing to education and development individuals and societies at large. By educating to respect equality of people, tolerance, excellence through fairness, sport can positively impact social inclusion and cohesion and this important potential has to be harnessed.

We welcome the work of the United Nations to mainstream sport in the policy agenda and enhance its impact on development. In this regard, we highly appreciate the work of the Special Adviser to the Secretary-General on Sport for Development and Peace Mr. Wilfried Lemke.

We recall the General Assembly’s landmark resolution 64/3 of 19 October 2009, which conferred observer status to the International Olympic Committee. Under
the able leadership of the IOC President, Thomas Bach, himself an Olympic Champion, we are better placed to effectively promote the Olympic ideals and values.

Collaborative efforts of all relevant organizations and agencies, including the IOC to enhance a policy-oriented and advocacy focus approach, especially in the context of ongoing work on the post-2015 development agenda are of critical importance.

Mr. President,

Policies and partnerships is a critical requirement for success at national level as well. The Government of Azerbaijan has placed the promotion of sport as one of our national development priorities.

This year we are celebrating the 20th anniversary of the Ministry of Youth and Sports—which was established within 18 month of our independence. We have been steadfast in mainstreaming sport into our development strategies and positioning our country as a sporting nation. Along with that our country has gained significant experience in hosting major events, not only at the European level, a big number of World Championships have been organized.

Promotion of sport as means of education, health and development also fully corresponds and underpins our state policy on youth. Today youth, with the median age of 30.1 years, constitutes 40 per cent of our population and remains our top priority. Targeted policies to ensure inclusive recreation, sports and culture programs are considered as factors contributing to success of our national youth team ranked among the top 10 nations at the Second Youth Olympic Games held in Nanjing, China.

Creation of sporting infrastructure is central to providing opportunity to exercise physical health and fostering culture of sport in the society. In the last 10 years alone, we have put in place more than 50 world-class facilities throughout the entire country. This sporting infrastructure provides access to facilities to all our people, at absolutely no cost to the individual. The opportunity to participate in "no-cost sport" has greatly enriched the lives of all our people, especially internally displaced persons, a total number of which continues to remain one of the biggest in the world.

This April our national Generations for Peace volunteers together with the United Nations Development Program (UNDP) and United Nations Children Fund (UNICEF), kicked off awareness raising initiative on the role of sport as a tool for peace to benefit of vulnerable groups, including refugees and IDPs.
We welcome the designation of the 6th April as International Day of Sport for Development and Peace in accordance with the General Assembly Resolution 68/9. This day has been included in the Ministry of Youth and Sports official calendar and we have already held numerous sporting competitions in collaboration with various federations and organizations.

International sporting events are important practical tool not only to identify talents and to win, but also to aid dialogue, understanding and tolerance among nations. In this regard, I would like to recall the remarks of the Secretary-General, on the eve of the Second Youth Olympic Games held in Nanjing, China, and I quote:

“Sport has a very unique and extraordinary power to bring people together and to drive social change. To bridge the gap between and among different ethnicities and religions and people and traditions-these are what the United Nations aims to promote and achieve.”

This view further cemented our own legacy goals and ambitions and we are deeply committed to achieving this objective. Over the last years Azerbaijan has also positioned itself as a destination of many sporting competitions. Along with the world sport events, regional sporting events bear first grade importance. It gives me pleasure and honour to inform this august body that our nation will host the inaugural European Games from 12 to 28 June 2015.

We recall with satisfaction that on November 28, 2012 the United Nations General Assembly adopted resolution 67/17 – sport as a means to promote education, health, development and peace. We were proud that less than 2 weeks later at its 41st General Assembly in Rome, the European Olympic Committee unanimously voted to award the inaugural 2015 European Games to Baku, Azerbaijan.

This was an historic decision, as the continents of Africa, the Americas and Oceania and Asia have a long history of continental games in their respective regions. In this respect, we commend the visionary approach of Mr. Patrick Hickey, the EOC President.

As a young independent nation, this decision was welcomed by the population of Azerbaijan as a source of joy and pride. Over the 17 days of competition in June 2015, more than 6000 athletes from Europe will compete in 20 sports, in the spirit of peace, fair, friendship and unity. While having had little more than 2 years to
prepare for the Games, our country is determined to do its best. This time our immediate and biggest challenge lies just 236 days from now.

We place the utmost importance on this event and nominated the First Lady of Azerbaijan and UNESCO Goodwill Ambassador Mehriban Aliyeva to lead our organization. It is with a great sense of honour and responsibility, the people and the Government of Azerbaijan are working to make this event a success.

The contribution of sport to peace has been crystallized since the inception of the Greek tradition of ekecheiria or “Olympic Truce” in the eight century B.C. and its principles maintain its relevance today. It is necessary to continue leveraging the power of sport for achieving peace, and in this regard, we invite the Secretary-General to continue his commendable efforts to further a culture of peace and harmony and implementation of the landmark resolution 48/11 of 25 October 1993.

In observance of resolution 68/9 entitled “Building a peaceful and better world through sport and the Olympic ideal”, it is important and appropriate to continue to encourage member states, especially in the era of new and global challenges, to observe both individually and collectively, the principles of Olympic Truce during the inaugural European Games next year.

In 2016, we will host the 42 World Chess Olympiad. In 2017, we will host the 4th Islamic Solidarity Games and just last month we were successful in our bid to host the UEFA Euro 2020 tournament.

We believe that these events will further strengthen friendship, solidarity and intercultural dialogue and are pleased and honoured to contribute in a truly tangible way to demonstrating the potential of sport to the attainment of the Millennium Development Goals.

Mr. President,

I take this opportunity to encourage all delegations to visit our country and see it first hand, sport in action for development and peace.

Thank you for your attention.