

**Statement by the Prime Minister of Pakistan  
H.E. Mr. Imran Khan  
14<sup>th</sup> ECO Summit  
(March 04, 2021)**

Distinguished Heads of States and Governments,  
Secretary General ECO,  
Excellencies,  
Ladies and Gentlemen,  
**Assalam-o-Alaikum,**

In Pakistan's capacity as the 13th Summit Chair, it is my honour to formally open the 14th Summit of Economic Cooperation Organization (ECO). I extend warm welcome and cordial greetings to all the participating leaders.

We appreciate President Erdogan's initiative in organizing this virtual Summit. Convening the Summit in these difficult times is a reflection of our collective commitment to ECO.

We commend Secretary-General Hadi Soleimanpour for ably leading the Organization's work.

Pakistan congratulates Turkmenistan as the next ECO Chair.

I also congratulate President Ilham Aliyev on successful liberation of Azerbaijan's occupied territories.

**Excellencies,**

In 2017, we celebrated the silver jubilee of expansion of ECO membership and adopted the landmark **ECO Vision 2025** and **Islamabad Declaration** on the occasion of the 13<sup>th</sup> Summit, hosted by Pakistan. It reflected Pakistan's strong resolve to advance our institutional goals and energize ECO as a dynamic Organization for regional cooperation.

**Excellencies,**

The focus of our present Summit - "Regional Economic Cooperation in the Aftermath of COVID-19" - is both apt and timely.

Like the rest of the world, the Member States of the ECO have been severely affected by the unprecedented health and economic crisis unleashed by the COVID-19 pandemic. Over 115 million people have been infected by the virus, and more than 2.5 million have lost their lives.

The world is still grappling with the pandemic's multiple dimensions. The full extent of its health, social, financial and economic impact on our countries has yet to be fully determined.

It is evident that developing countries, including the ECO members, have been disproportionately affected. Our economies have contracted. Trade has declined. Poverty and inequality have increased.

**Excellencies,**

We, in Pakistan, realized that we must prevent our people from dying from the virus and from hunger.

We pursued a 'people and poor-centric approach' and relied on a strategy of "smart lockdowns." We simultaneously focused on saving lives, securing livelihoods, and stimulating the economy.

Despite our financial constraints, my Government allocated an unprecedented 8 billion dollars to support the poorest and most vulnerable households and small businesses, with direct cash handouts and subsidies under the Ehsaas (Compassion) programme.

Pakistan has registered over half-a-million confirmed cases of Corona, but, Alhamdulillah, our recovery rate has been 93.5%. Currently, in a population of 220 million people, we have over 1,000 daily infections. Our response strategy has been internationally appreciated, including by the WHO.

### **Excellencies,**

The COVID-19 pandemic is not over yet. We must ensure that our peoples secure the earliest possible access to the vaccines being produced, on an affordable and equitable basis. The vaccine must be declared a "global public good." No one will be safe from the virus unless everyone is safe.

Pakistan has begun its vaccination drive with the front-line health workers as our highest priority.

We must also address the economic impact of the pandemic. The world economy has contracted by 5 per cent. The rich countries have injected \$20 trillion to stimulate their economies. Our economies are equally affected. But we do not have the capacity or fiscal space to create such liquidity.

I have proposed a 5-point plan to provide developing countries the fiscal space to recover from the COVID crisis, including: Debt relief; SDR creation and redistribution; Concessional finance; Mobilization of climate finance; and Ending illicit financial flows and return of stolen assets to developing countries.

### **Excellencies,**

Apart from its health and economic consequences, the COVID crisis has exacerbated the manifestations of religious discrimination, **xenophobia** and **Islamophobia** in various parts of the world. We have witnessed this in our immediate neighbourhood. The COVID lockdowns have also enabled the suppression of peoples in occupied territories struggling for their right to self-determination.

It is essential to reject any attempt to link Islam with terrorism. Similarly, we must oppose attempts to use 'freedom of expression' to hurt the special feelings of the Muslims towards the Holy Prophet (PBUH).

At the UN, Pakistan, Turkey and other OIC countries have initiated a proposal for the annual observance of an 'International Day to Combat Islamophobia.'

### **Excellencies,**

The Member States of ECO represent half a billion people and cover a contiguous area of 8 million square miles (or 12 million square km). We form the geographical link on the Asian Continent between East and West, North and South.

We possess the two essential pre-requisites for economic growth - rich resources and enterprising people. We have the potential for much larger production and consumption.

Our common heritage and culture, nurtured by luminaries like Al-Beiruni, Farabi, Rumi and Iqbal, provide a solid foundation for cooperation under the ECO umbrella.

In the Vision 2025, the ECO members have set themselves an ambitious agenda of enhanced collaboration - in Trade, Energy, Tourism, Agricultural and Industrial Growth, and Social Welfare. We should undertake a mid-term review of the progress made, accelerate the pace of implementation, and deepen the scope of our cooperation.

#### **Excellencies,**

In advancing our common objectives, we must take full advantage of our geographical location, economic assets, and political relationships. Regional connectivity and integration has been proven to be essential for rapid growth and development. Enhanced physical infrastructure will generate economic activity, trade, employment, mobility and cross-border exchanges.

Peace in Afghanistan is crucial to the success of such physical integration in the ECO region. I hope that successful culmination of the Intra-Afghan Negotiations will lead to durable peace and security in Afghanistan.

#### **Excellencies,**

Our priorities and goals are clear. I propose that we focus on the following six points:

**First**, we need to recover robustly from the economic and health crises induced by the pandemic. We must mobilize the national and international resources required for this purpose. I request ECO's support for my 5-point agenda mentioned earlier.

**Second**, we should adopt a plan to build resilient healthcare systems to respond to such crisis in future. We must possess the capacity to produce the medical equipment and medicines essential to respond to chronic and infectious diseases.

**Third**, we should develop an integrated transport network to facilitate both intra-ECO trade and serve as a pathway for trade between the major economies to our East and West, North and South. The Istanbul-Tehran-Islamabad commercial cargo train and proposed Uzbekistan-Afghanistan-Pakistan railway links are important regional connectivity projects. In addition, linking CPEC with Afghanistan and beyond is vital.

**Fourth**, we must implement the cross-border projects already agreed among ECO members, including TAPI gas pipeline and CASA 1000. Establishing an ECO Investment Agency and organizing an annual ECO Investment Fair where investment-ready projects could be presented to ECO and global investors are ideas that should be explored.

**Fifth**, studies indicate that our mutual trade, which is just 8% of our total trade, could be expanded ten-fold. Enhanced transport links will help. But, we should promote conscious measures for trade promotion; simplify border procedures; establish intra-regional institutional linkages; reinforce existing regional mechanisms like ECO Trade Development Bank; operationalize ECO Trade Agreement; and develop new initiatives like the Clearing Union.

**Sixth**, to remain competitive, we must promote knowledge-based economies; expand expenditures on research and development; and focus on rapid digitalization especially extension of broadband to all parts of our countries.

The ECO, as envisaged in the Vision 2025, should engage in dialogues with other regional and international organizations. We could emulate some of the successful models of cooperation in the EU, ASEAN and the African Union.

**Excellencies,**

For Pakistan, the vision of the ECO's regional economic integration is an essential component of a strategy to transform the tensions of geo-politics into the dividends of geo-economics.

I would like to conclude by reaffirming Pakistan's abiding commitment to ECO, to the founding principles of the Treaty of Izmir, and to the full implementation of ECO Vision 2025.

**Excellencies,**

As per the rules and procedures of the ECO, I now propose election of President **Recep Tayyip Erdogan** as the Chair of the **14th** Summit.

I congratulate His Excellency Recep Tayyip Erdogan, President of the Republic of Turkey, on his election and give him the floor to carry the Summit forward.

**I thank you all.**

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