

**Statement by H.E. Dr. Hadi Soleimanpour
ECO Secretary General
14th ECO Summit (Virtual)
(March 4, 2021)**

**Honorable Chairman H.E. President Erdogan
Honourable Heads of States and Governments,
Respectable Delegates,**

Asalam alaikom and good evening

I am honored to express sincere felicitations to Your Excellency, Mr. Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, the honorable President of the Republic of Turkey for chairing the 14th ECO Summit under the very much relevant theme of Regional Economic Cooperation in the aftermath of COVID-19. I would also like to extend my deep gratitude to the honorable Prime Minister of the Islamic Republic of Pakistan, His Excellency Mr. Imran Khan for Pakistan's guidance to ECO since last Summit.

I am also thankful to the Republic of Tajikistan and Republic of Turkey for leading the Organization during the last three years. Under the wise leadership of H.E. President Rahmon and Excellency's government, the ECO finalized the reform process aimed at making the Organization more efficient and effective. The ECO turned to be a more project and result oriented Organization under the seasoned leadership of H.E. President Erdoğan and Excellency's government.

I would also like to warmly welcome and congratulate the honorable President of Turkmenistan, His Excellency Mr. Gurbanguly Berdimuhamedow and Excellency's Government to assume Organization's Chairmanship for 2021. Under Your Excellency's patronage and visionary leadership, the ECO would make further progress and is expected to be more innovative.

I would also like to appreciate His Excellency Dr. Hassan Rouhani the honorable President of Islamic Republic of Iran and Excellency's government for permanent support to ECO Headquarters in Tehran to fulfill its tasks.

Let me also congratulate the newly elected honourable President of the Republic of Tajikistan His Excellency Emomali Rahmon, Honorable President of Islamic Republic of Afghanistan His Excellency Dr. Ashraf Ghani, Honorable President of Kazakhstan His Excellency Mr. Kassym-Jomart Tokayev and the Honorable President of Kyrgyz Republic His Excellency Mr. Sadyr Zhaparov. I would like to assure H.E President Ghani that ECO attaches high importance to development of our brotherly country of Afghanistan. I would also like to thank H.E Shavkat Mirziyoyev the honorable President of the Republic of Uzbekistan under whose supportive approach Organization is benefitting from the increased engagements of Uzbekistan in ECO activities.

I further felicitate His Excellency Mr. Ilham Aliyev the honorable President of the Republic of Azerbaijan for the establishment of ECO Research Center in Baku, an initiative of late President H.E. Mr. Heydar Aliyev, which is a remarkable achievement for ECO family to make the organization more multidimensional. On this landmark occasion, let's recall the admirable Azerbaijani martyrs who scarified their lives to maintain territorial integrity of Republic of Azerbaijan.

Let me also congratulate on the occasion of the 30th Anniversary of the Independence of Central Asian Countries and Republic of Azerbaijan.

Moreover, I thank the honorable leaders and observers for their kind participation in this important ECO Event.

Excellencies,

Under your wise leadership and valuable support, the Organization is on the right track. Sense of ownership and partnership is governed. Reform process has refreshed the organization. The project oriented approach is institutionalized, and required regional financial system and investment mechanism to support implementation of regional projects is going to be developed.

Excellencies,

Allow me to report some recent achievements in sectoral priority areas.

In transit transport, some latest developments during last year are **(i)** Commercialization of Kazakhstan-Turkmenistan-Iran (KTI) railway **(ii)** Finalization of study reports of Kyrgyzstan-Tajikistan-Afghanistan-Iran (KTAI) and Islamabad-Tehran-Istanbul (ITI) road corridors, **(iii)** Resumption of ITI cargo train and **(iv)** Development of ECO Guidelines under COVID conditions to facilitate trans-border movement of essential food and medical stuff.

In 2021 under the Chairmanship of Turkmenistan, we plan to turn the major ECO transit corridors into Economic corridors, single window on main ECO Border Crossing points would be established, ECO dry ports would be linked up with the region's main sea ports and ECO Sea Hubs would be created.

Excellencies,

In trade, though we witnessed some progress, desired outcome is to be seen. Today, our intra-regional trade volume stands at around only 8% of the total ECO global trade size. To boost regional economic recovery in the post-COVID era, there is a strong need to facilitate regional trade and investment. Relevantly, an interim arrangement based on ECOTA is needed while a more comprehensive agreement should be agreed upon to meet national interests of all ten ECO Member States.

I request Your Excellencies to mandate the honourable ECO Trade Ministers to be more flexible during their scheduled interaction in the next Trade Ministerial Meeting this year.

In energy sector, three important projects are under steady progress, which include 'ECO Clean Energy Centre', 'ECO Regional Electricity Market' and 'Energy Strategy 2030 including ECO Energy Corridors'.

In tourism sector, the ECO tourism action plan as well as ECO major tour operators' networks, ECO tourism routes and destination chains, and ECO single visa for inbound tourists as well as designing virus free tourism system are in preparation process to be launched in post COVID situation.

Excellencies,

A great experience in the COVID Crunch is that confronting with pandemic and other such diseases inevitably require collective efforts and systematic cooperation in the fields of health, medicine, food safety and reliable transit-transport system at regional level.

ECO Region finds a good opportunity in the post-COVID scenario to jointly address the economic recovery of the Member States. This requires a more balanced and comprehensive system for trade and removal of tariff and non tariff barriers, more supportive instruments for intra-regional investment, creation of regional value chains, comprehensive regional food security system, enhancement of regional financial system, advanced and reliable connectivity arrangements and appropriate system for public to public and business to business relations. In the given context, insights and support of our leaders are desired and highly appreciated.

In conclusion, I would like to thank H.E. the honourable President of Turkey to host this important ECO event. I also reiterate my deep gratitude to the honourable Heads of States/Governments and Heads of Delegations of the Member States for their valuable presence in the event.

Thank you, Excellencies