

**Statement by
ECO Secretary General H.E. Dr. Hadi Soleimanpour
31 Meeting of the Regional Planning Council (RPC)
January 21, 2021**

**His Excellency Ibrahim Senel, the Head of Delegation of Turkey,
Distinguishes Participants
Ladies and gentlemen,**

I am privileged, indeed, to welcome you at this 31st Session of the ECO Regional Planning Council. Thank you all for making it convenient to participate in this mega ECO event which is convened every year to review the past activities of the organization, as well as consider and evolve some fresh programs and projects to be executed from ECO's platform for continuing the developmental process in our region.

As you are kindly aware, the post-30th RPC period witnessed a persistent global and regional crisis due to the outbreak of COVID-19. The ongoing pandemic, that yet to meet an end, continues to affect the routine public and private as well as international and regional affairs. The COVID crunch, like most parts of the world, has not spared our region, hampering regular developmental activities which were perceived to be made in consideration of the ECO Work Program and Calendar of Events for 2020 endorsed by the 30th Meeting of RPC. It is relevant to mention here that the domestic containment measures and global disruption to connectivity, trade, tourism and production have required our region to prepare for the prospects of an economic slowdown. As of other regions, the public infrastructure in the ECO region was neither built nor prepared to counter such kind of a sudden situation.

Though the pandemic bears hardship and difficulties, it also appeared to give some learning lessons. One of our experiences in the time of crisis is resorting to the virtual modes of working that proved to be efficient, cost-effective and fast-track. Bearing this in mind, the Secretariat arranged variety of inter-secretariat webinars and conducted almost 90% of ECO meetings virtually during 2020 in the pursuit of organization's goals as per ECO Vision 2025 that included ministerial and HLWG meetings. The online holding of 31st session of RPC is a continuation of such virtual approach which has been globally adopted in the aftermath of the pandemic.

Distinguished delegates

Among a number of initiatives taken in special consideration of the crisis, the Secretariat released a concise preliminary assessment concerning the potential impact of COVID-19 on the ECO Region's Economy. This assessment briefly reviews the possible repercussions on the main economic sectors of the region for future planning, including the fields of trade and investment, agriculture, transport and communication, human resource and sustainable development, energy, tourism and industry.

In the foregoing conditions, the Secretariat also prioritized the organization's most essential events and activities twice during 2020 to follow up and ensure the recommendations of 30th RPC. Moreover, the year 2020 also witnessed tangible actions that Secretariat took to implement the decisions of 24th COM on post-reform issues, including restructuring of the Secretariat and revised/new staff strength, as well as making the ECO more project-oriented to secure the objectives of ECO Vision 2025. It may be mentioned that the 24th Meeting of COM authorized the Secretary General to hire specialist/consultant for 10 small sized bankable projects annually, utilizing US\$ 10,000/- for each project from the General Reserve Fund. (*Around eight small size projects were implemented during 2020*). To make our Organization more project and result oriented, I would like to request the Council to support the Secretariat for expanding the scope and number of small sized projects to feasibility study projects by authorizing Secretary General to implement 10 more projects annually utilizing US\$ 10000 for each from GRF. I suggest that the issue may be considered under any other business.

In addition to this, I approached some prominent regional and international monetary institutions in the beginning of crisis, including Asian Development Bank, Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank, European Bank for Reconstruction and Development, World Bank etc. to seek their collaborative engagements with the ECO Trade and Development Bank for supporting the ECO Region in the ongoing era of crunch. Most of them welcomed the idea and introduced their focal points to have a better coordination with ETDB to find ways and means for joint operation and activities.

Distinguished Colleagues,

As you may be aware, during last year we concentrated on making ECO more project-oriented. ECO's project performance has been in line with recommendations of *Antalya Communiqué* (24th Meeting of ECO Council of Ministers, 8-9 November 2019, Antalya). The Communiqué particularly "encouraged the project and result-oriented approach of the Organization". In the given context, the key project performance indicators (KPPIs) have been achieved as follows: (i) Project Completion rate has increased by 20% in 2020 compared to the same period in 2019; (ii) Project Progress rate has increased by 40% in 2020 and (iii) Project Portfolio Management rate has increased by 12% in 2020.

I would like to further underline some of our activities in the specific regional sectors which include, trade and investment, transit transport, EME, health, agriculture, industry and tourism.

Trade & Investment

In 2018, the cumulative world trade of the ECO countries reached US\$ 806 billion. The ECO region is a net importer with deficit of US\$16 billion. In the same year, intra-ECO trade accounts for 8.1 percent of the total trade of its members, significantly modest amount compared to other economic blocks. These figures show that the current level of intra-ECO trade is still below its potential. According to the findings of a recent ECO study, there is a potential to increase the trade among the member states by ten-fold.

The main instrument to increase the trade among ECO member states is ECOTA. It is worth highlighting that we have taken a significant step up in 8th Meeting of ECOTA Cooperation Council in August this year. The Parties, as a way out, agreed to consider Secretariat's proposal of sectoral approach on ECOTA and convey their comments in three months for consideration by the 9th ECOTA Cooperation Council Meeting.

ECOTA remained on top of the agenda of the 24th COM. The Council appreciated the efforts of the ECOTA Cooperation Council for the implementation of ECOTA and attached importance on convening the 5th Ministerial Meeting of Economy/ Development in 2020 scheduled to be held in Tajikistan, which is expected to evaluate the operationalization of the agreement, among others, by removing impediments in the way of its implementation. The relevant sectoral committee is also expected to mull over the possibility of developing a result-oriented approach to facilitate and enhance intra-trade activities in the region.

Efforts are under way to expand the membership of the ECO Trade and Development Bank (ECO-TDB), which is functioning progressively and professionally, and enhance contributions/capital from the Member States to play greater role in the economic development of the region. Taking this opportunity, I would request the remaining Member States to join the bank to expand its membership. The Secretariat, in consultation with the Bank, is attempting to develop regional projects for prosperity and high dividends in the Member States.

Our efforts, in improving the region's financial-banking system, are not limited to ECOTDB. The Secretariat is also endeavoring to start another initiative, the "ECO Clearing Union" on the lines of Asian Clearing Union. In this regard, we are working for convenience of the member states in all areas particularly trade and investment in the region. The draft Agreement has been circulated and will be discussed in the

forthcoming Experts Group meeting and thereafter Meeting of the Heads of the Central Banks expected to be held this year.

Transit Transport

Guided by recommendations of the ECO Vision-2025 and the Turkmenbashi Declaration to harmonize regional efforts on transit transport, the Secretariat prepared and circulated “ECO Practical Guidelines on Cross Border Facilitation Measures under conditions of COVID-19” in a bid to assist the Member States, considering the post-pandemic restrictions on international travel and group gatherings. The primary focus of these guidelines is to facilitate an unhindered passage of essential goods across the ECO border points, including medicines and food stuff.

A virtual Meeting of the ECO Transport Ministers was organized on December 15, 2020 to discuss the impacts of COVID-19 pandemic on the region’s transport sector and the ways and means to address the stressed socio-economic conditions. During the session the Ministers adopted a Declaration, requesting Member States to fully implement the ECO Transit Transport Framework Agreement (TTFA), and fulfill their commitments as per TTFA provisions and the “ECO Practical Guidelines on Cross Border Facilitation Measures under conditions of COVID-19”.

Moreover, sequel meetings were organized concerning the Joint ECO-ESCAP-IsDB Project on Commercialization of the Kazakhstan-Turkmenistan-Iran (KTI) railway. As an outcome, the project stands completed and an MoU is expected to be signed, this month, among the en-route member countries.

On Islamabad-Tehran-Istanbul (ITI) Container Train, the en-route member countries during the 11th High-Level Working Group Meeting organized virtually on October 27, 2020, agreed to resume the operations of ITI Container Train by the end of January 2021. Negotiations to this end are currently underway through different platforms.

As regards the ongoing railway projects, I deem appropriate to mention the KTAI, which will connect Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Afghanistan and Iran to China. As part of this project, a 140 kilometers railway from Khaf in Iran to Rozanak in Afghanistan was officially inaugurated on December 10, 2020. The KTAI en-route countries’ Transport Ministers are scheduled meet in first half of 2021 to discuss this project. ECO Secretariat believes that the Project should be divided into smaller thus easily manageable parts with the aim to speed up construction of missing links.

Amid the crisis, a test run of loaded trucks carrying goods under TIR along KTAI road corridor was conducted that highlighted the significance of launching the UN Digital transport solutions, i.e. e-TIR and e-CMR, in favor of facilitating the flow of goods across the borders of the region.

The 1st meeting of ECO Working Group on Civil Aviation was also held virtually on November 23, 2020 to discuss the pandemic's impact on civil aviation and expanded cooperation in different fields of the Industry. The issue of facilitated air connection among capital cities and major ECO tourist destinations was also on the agenda to consider and encourage public and private civil airlines to establish direct flights among such destinations in the member states.

On the Maritime cooperation, detailed internal discussions on the project proposal "Establishment of a common gateway among ECO countries - ECO Gate" for cross sectoral coordination/functionality, resulted in the circulation of the proposal among Member States and coordination with the Islamic Development Bank as the potential project partner.

EME

As regards energy, mineral and environment, it may be noted that the area remains one of the most important sectors of development on ECO's agenda. With cooperation of Member States, ECO Secretariat has accomplished the launching and finalizing of the preparatory phase of project on establishment of ECO Clean Energy Center. Our task ahead is to have joint ownership, responsibility and accountability whilst to resolve the process of host country selection, adopting of legal document on establishment and later on, supporting the deeds of Centre to address the needs and interests of our Member States in order to function as a fully fledged entity. Another priority is manifested in our flagship project for establishment of ECO Regional Electricity Market. ECO has been exploring suitable mechanisms with the interested Member States and our international partners to define the roadmap for launching of the intended project. Encouraged by the shared interest of Member States and mandated by the 30th RPC decision, ECO Secretariat has started to elaborate on a new Regional Energy Strategy. It is considered to provide precise roadmap on our priorities in particular with exact actions to take in line with ECO Vision 2025. By attracting local consultants from our interested Member States, Secretariat is in the process to launch bankable project to submit subject strategy in the upcoming Energy Ministerial Meeting.

As regards minerals, I would particularly point out the initiative on preparation of "ECO-Environmental Quality Index (ECO-EQI) Map of the ECO Region", which requires the support of all Member States with a view to trigger our cooperation in the field of minerals and mining industry implicating also environmental, social and economic factors too.

As you are well aware, one of the environmental common concerns in the region is the Land Degradation which has cross-cutting social, environmental and economic impacts. It is very moment that our member states will render all possible support to launch our comprehensive project on ECO Landcare Program. As a starting point it is

sought to establish Coordination Mechanism for smooth and efficient process of generating synergy by addressing needs and interests of our Member States. Meanwhile, having stipulated pro-active involvement of Member States, the Secretariat would like to embark on the launching implementation process of “Framework Plan of Action on Environment Cooperation and Global Warming for ECO Member States and the “Work Plan on Biodiversity in ECO Region.

Health

Against the backdrop of the pandemic, an ECO High Level Expert Group Meeting on Health was held virtually to concentrate on accelerated, effective and timely interaction in the relevant sector, giving special consideration to the communicable diseases. During the meeting, the Member States proposed the establishment of a Regional Consultation Mechanism for technical cooperation on priority communicable diseases, specifically COVID-19. Such mechanism would be consisting of senior officials of Member States and WHO to elaborate on coordinated and complementary actions for country preparedness and response plans, including operational methods to secure critical supplies, prevent depletion of stocks and mitigate market disruptions and hoarding for all ECO Member States that need further support.

AIT

Considering the decreased dependency on fossil fuels and desired cooperation for utilization of non-fuel resources, as well as the fact that the tourism sector’s potential was not fully exploited, the Member States stressed on expanded collaboration in the sector as the main area of cooperation during the development of ECO-Vision 2025. In line with the deliberations with Member States, the ECO Secretariat is, relevantly, planning to effect the ECO Regional Strategy and Action Plan for Sustainable Tourism Development in the region, mobilizing the existing region’s potential in the sector. To utilize the great potential of the region, diversification and easement of tourism activities, availability of quality services and visibility of the area is a necessary requirement.

As regards agriculture and industry, the areas are highly important and key non-fuel sectors which can boost economic growth of the region through increased productivity. Making progress in these sectors could benefit other areas of cooperation, as well. Such a need is genuinely noticed in the aftermath of COVID-19. Real sector cooperation and coordination between the Member States is the key factor to overcome unemployment, poverty and other concrete problems of the ECO-Region. The offer of the Republic of Uzbekistan to host ministerial meeting on agriculture as well as ministerial meeting on tourism is a timely gesture to explore possibilities for increased cooperative and coordinated activities amongst the Member States in the relevant sectors.

Moreover, I would like to highlight some important projects that include the establishment of ECO Center of Efficiency of Water Utilization in Agriculture (CEWUA), as well as proposed Green Labeling System, and some under consideration relevant projects on organic products, slaughter houses and reference laboratories in the Member States.

Dear Participants

ECO is continuously endeavoring to deepen and enhance its relations with international organizations, regional peers, and relevant non-ECO Countries in a mutually beneficial way. ECO's image in the international arena is growing. In addition to the required activities to furthering the cooperation with the UN system, including its specialized agencies as well as other relevant international and regional organizations, this 31st RPC recommends some fresh proposals for strengthening regional integration and highlighting common regional identity. The activities of the ECO specialization agencies have also expanded in their respective fields and this year, for the first time, they have identified several joint projects or activities. Accordingly, the Council approves a comprehensive work programme for the ECO specialized agencies to be implemented in 2021".

Moreover, the ECO remains committed to support and facilitate the social and economic development in Afghanistan, and such commitment reflects in the ECO Advocacy Program for Afghanistan (EAPA) adopted by 23rd COM in April 2018. Under the EAPA, the modalities for the operation of the ECO Fund for Afghanistan were developed to shoulder the country's efforts for reconstruction and development. In this context, the ECO Secretariat remains ever-willing and receptive to support the processes and interactions aimed at securing peace, stability, development and economic growth in Afghanistan.

Though the prevailing working conditions are yet to be normalized, this year's RPC is believed, as always, to adopt (i) the organization's fresh Work Program and Calendar of Events for 2021, including the activities that could not be made in 2020 due to the explained reasons. In this regard, relevant sectoral committees have already developed necessary documents/proposal to facilitate the working of this session. The council is also expected to validate the introduction of more small sized bankable projects (minimum 10 for 2021), recommending COM to authorize the Secretary General for utilization of General Reserve Fund (GRF) for another 10 small sized feasibility study projects (each within the limit of US\$ 10,000) through CPR and adoption of silence/normal procedure for COM's approval. The esteemed Council may also endorse the continuation of virtual meetings as well as to consider midterm virtual session of RPC.

Despite the tight working conditions due to the ongoing COVID crisis, the ECO Secretariat remains determined to achieve the aims and objectives set forth by the

esteemed Council and other forums of the Organization. However, it looks forward to an ever increased and more interactive approach of the Member States that could support and encourage the Secretariat in the pursuit of given tasks and targets.

While concluding my remarks, I once again thank the honourable delegates for their kind participation in the event, wishing this meeting to be a success for the mutual benefit and betterment of the entire ECO Region.

Thank you.

Statement by
H.E. İbrahim ŞENEL, President of the Strategy and Budget Office of the
Presidency of the Republic of Turkey
31 Meeting of the Regional Planning Council (RPC)
January 21, 2021

Bismillahirrahmanirrahim,

Excellencies, Heads of Delegation

His Excellency Hadi Soleimanpour, Secretary General of ECO

Distinguished Colleagues,

Ladies and Gentlemen,

Assalamualaikum ve Rahmetullahi ve Berakatuh

It is a great pleasure for me to chair the Plenary Session of the thirty-first meeting of the ECO Regional Planning Council (RPC). I would like to express my sincere gratitude to the ECO Secretariat for the excellent preparations made for the success of this Meeting. I hope discussions and deliberations during the meeting will further enhance our cooperation in the ECO region.

Distinguished Delegates,

We are passing through extremely difficult times due to the Covid Nineteen (19) pandemic which has been jeopardizing our social and economic life. The pandemic has already claimed the lives of more than two million people.

This negative trend will also seriously affect our commitments in crucial documents such as SDGs Agenda Two Thousand Thirty (2030) at the global level and ECO Vision Two Thousand Twenty-Five (2025) at the regional level.

It bears a great importance to be unified in these hard times. We have to overcome this menace through strong interventions at the national level and intense cooperation at the international and regional levels. As the Government of Turkey, we are always ready to help our brotherly countries in fighting against the pandemic.

In this context, we have extended assistance to one hundred and fifty eight (158) countries so far including all ECO countries. We supported these countries not only by providing the necessary equipment but also by sharing our experiences and knowledge.

Within this context, I would like to underline that we tried to benefit from digital technologies extensively and designed a distance learning programme that we call "E-Learning Program" initiated by our Ministry of Health.

We are ready to open the Programme for the use of ECO Member States in the context of the fight against the pandemic. Through the "E-Learning Program", Turkey's knowledge and experience so far and other relevant vital issues will be shared with

healthcare workers through our specialized professors' lectures in an interactive manner without being bound by geographical restrictions.

Distinguished colleagues,

Due to the adverse effects of the Covid Nineteen (19) pandemic, the world has faced the deepest recession after the great depression. The overall global GDP is projected to decline by four point four percent (4.4%) and the trade volume is expected to decrease by thirteen point four (13.4)% in two thousand twenty (2020). As ECO member countries, we have been facing similar trends. The projected GDP growth rates of most of the countries are in the negative trajectory.

In order to better cope with such crises, we need to take urgent measures for enhancing intra-regional trade. The first step is, no doubt, the operationalization of ECOTA at the earliest. I strongly believe that contracting parties need to intensify their efforts to that end.

Esteemed Participants,

Similar to many economic sectors, the global transportation industry is being affected adversely by the Covid-Nineteen (19) pandemic. The global freight forwarding market is expected to shrink by seven point five (7.5) percent in two thousand twenty (2020) compared to two thousand nineteen (2019).

With its important geostrategic position, the ECO Region, as a continuous bloc, can decrease the adverse impacts of this global pandemic by a well-functioning transport industry, large transport investments, and effective transport coordination among the ECO member countries.

In this respect, as Turkey, we attach utmost importance to the effective implementation of the Transit Transport Framework Agreement (TTFA) and smooth and efficient functioning of the ECO road and railway projects especially ITI Road Corridor, ITI and Istanbul-Almaty Railway Projects under the ECO umbrella.

Distinguished Colleagues,

The Covid Nineteen (19) pandemic also underlined the importance of the agricultural sector which provides significant contributions to our economies as well as generating employment for our people.

According to the World Food Programme, there were six hundred ninety million (690) people who did not have enough food to eat. Due to the COVID, one hundred thirty (130) million additional people are under the risk of being pushed to the edge of starvation.

In this respect, as Turkey, we strongly believe that the ECO Regional Coordination Centre (ECO-RCC) can play a significant role in terms of enhancing cooperation among our countries towards ensuring food security and developing the agricultural sector in our region. We believe that ECO-RCC has great potential to assist our member countries in the realization of concrete projects in this realm. Hence, we would like to invite our member countries to actively participate in the activities of the Center.

Furthermore, I would like to underline that, as Turkey, we are always ready to be involved in and support concrete projects of the ECO under other cooperation areas, including industry, tourism, health and education.

Distinguished Delegates,

In the last part of my statement, I would like to touch upon a few issues that have already been addressed in various forms in our statements made during previous ECO meetings.

As one of the co-founders of ECO, we always attach great importance to the success of ECO and underline the need for focusing on the main and most needed cooperation areas.

But when we check our agenda what we see unfortunately is the following: There are too many diverse issues and subjects in our agenda which slows down the performance of the Organization.

We have numerous meetings in our basket waiting for a host country for several consecutive years and there are a considerable number of postponed events due to a lack of interest from the Member Countries. We need a sharper focus especially on trade related issues and we need to concentrate on areas where the member countries show interest and therefore we can produce fruitful results quickly for the benefit of our people.

I think it is the right time for thinking about measures for preventing this slowdown. For example, we can also temporarily suspend the agenda items lacking interest from the member countries and there exist continuous setbacks in furthering our cooperation. We should use our human capital and limited budget effectively.

I would like to propose that the Secretariat may work on this issue and prepare a set of rules for taking off from our agenda the unattended Meetings and cooperation fields which do not induce required interest from member countries. Then the Secretariat may circulate the study to the member countries within three months for getting their views and suggestions.

In addition to this, if we all agree, when a distinguished member state proposes a new programme or a project, a preliminary study that includes the proposed project's cost-

benefit analysis with its potential contribution to our cooperation may be presented to Member countries and the Secretariat in written. With this modality, member countries may better evaluate the feasibility of the idea and decide more effectively whether to participate or not in these newly proposed programmes and projects.

If the august house agrees, I would like to ask Secretariat to insert a paragraph into the report on these proposals.

Excellences, Distinguished Delegates,

Before concluding my remarks, I wish you all the success for the thirty first (31st) RPC Meeting.

Thank you very much.

Assalamualaikum ve Rahmetullahi ve Berakatuh.

**Statement by
the Head of Delegation of the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan
31 Meeting of the Regional Planning Council (RPC)
January 21, 2021**

**Your Excellency Dr . Suleimanpour, Secretary General of ECO,
Honorable Head of Delegations,
Distinguished Participants,Ambassadors,
Ladies and Gentlemen.**

Assalam Aliakum and Good Morning.

First of all, I would like to thank the Government of Islamic Republic of Iran for hosting this Event and thanks to ECO Secretariat for organizing 31st Regional Planning Council Meeting.

On behalf of the Government and People of Afghanistan, I express my deep condolences to all member countries for the loss of many precious lives of their citizens during this pandemic of COVID-19.

Afghanistan has braced the Coronavirus pandemic while it was already struggling with a series of insecurity and internal political uncertainties and attempting to make its way out of a-four-decade long war. Just before the COVID-19, a GDP growth rate of 3.4% was projected for the fiscal year of 2020. However, such aspiration now seems more of an ideal situation and hard to achieve as the COVID-19 disrupted many of the social and economic activities around the world, including Afghanistan.

Distinguished Delegates,

The world after the pandemic will be different and the business as usual will not work anymore. In many countries, the population growth is much higher than the economic growth. Conflict zones are expanding with severe implications for people and economies.

There are many players in the development industry, but they are not acting in a coordinated manner. There is a huge funding gap of around US\$ 4.5 trillion/year to finance development in developing countries. Uncoordinated interventions further increase aid dependency in least developed countries and fragile states.

Taking into account the strategic location of Afghanistan, it enables us to connect Central Asian Republics with South Asian countries. The Central Asian Republics have surplus energy sources such as electricity, oil and gas, while the South Asian countries

are in shortage of that source. Through Afghanistan, energy transmission projects such as (TOTAP, TAPI, CASA 1000) are possible to reach from Central Asia to South Asia. Therefore, we play as bridge connecting the two regions in trade and energy transmission.

Inequality remains persistent not only across the world, but also among the Muslim countries. Islamic social finance (zakat) (US\$ 2 trillion in 2015) provides huge opportunities but lack of uncoordinated interventions and well-designed mechanisms to align them with development agenda is still a challenge. All these issues retard the progress towards achieving sustainable development, particularly in countries affected by conflict and fragility.

Honorable Participants:

Afghanistan has gone through a rapid period of socio-economic and regime change supported by the international community. Afghanistan's growth trajectory surged at an average annual rate of 9.4%, driven mainly by ODA flows financing the agriculture, construction and service sector.

The withdrawal of international security forces and rapid decrease in international aid challenged our development process and now our national poverty rate is 47.3%, unemployment rate is 18.6% and food insecurity rate is 37%.

COVID-19 came at a time when Afghanistan was already grappling with a number of socio-economic and political issues in addition to the ongoing conflict that has taken a heavy toll on the people's lives and the economy.

Although these challenges are common in many least developed countries, their scale and importance vary from country to country. Therefore, the question is how can trade and regional connectivity become instrumental in addressing the challenges that are prevalent in landlocked and least developed countries affected by conflict and fragility?

Ladies and Gentlemen:

The existing regional connectivity platforms such as the ECO, OECD's EURASIA summit, Central Asia Regional Economic Cooperation (CAREC), and Regional Economic Cooperation Conference for Afghanistan (RECCA) provide us the opportunity to bring about better economic performance that ultimately leads to shared prosperity by improving our connectivity, trade relations, and building our institutional capacities through peer-learning, knowledge transfer initiatives, cross-border investments, and people to people cooperation. H.E. President M. Ashraf Ghani says: The concept of roundabout is that people, goods, civilizations, ideas move freely; they don't get stuck.

We strongly welcome the promising progress made under the existing regional platforms that led to the operationalization of the agreement on the Chabahar International Transport and Transit Corridor; completion of the Khuwaf-Herat Railway, the award of contract on the electricity transmission line in Afghanistan under CASA 1000, the ongoing progress under the TAPI and completion of the feasibility studies of TAP 500 as well as the signing of the Lapis Lazuli Route Agreement on the sidelines of RECCA 7 as a flagship agreement towards deepening connectivity and expanding trade in the wider region.

Distinguished Delegates:

The obstacles and challenges that hinder Afghanistan in development and cooperation are rooted to more than forty years of war and conflict. Although we are in the devastating war, that takes lives on a daily basis, but the unique opportunity that Afghanistan has achieved in the last 20 years in good governance, promotion of democratic institutions and human rights, upgraded us as a vital partner to both region and the world.

In 30th RPC, Afghanistan being mandated over a hundred follow up activities in the eight (8) key areas: Fortunately, we have made some significant progress on some sections of the given activities, where some highlights are:

- There are some good improvements on the ECO Trust Fund for Afghanistan, which include the transfer of the bank account from London to Kabul branch bank.
- The Khawaf-Herat railway officially inaugurated, which a great achievement for both country (Iran and Afghanistan).
- Afghanistan is working closely with ECO Secretariat and other member states to implement and accomplish the RPCs follow up activities, goals, agreements and projects.
- We fully encourage all member states to find appropriate solutions for adoption of the ECO Trade agreement (ECOTA).

We kindly request republic of Turkey to accelerate the implementation of Doctor Rafqi Kamel Organization Hospital Project in Afghanistan and we are ready to support them for project implementation.

At the end I reiterate Afghanistan is fully support and remains committed to the principle and objectives of the ECO, as productive regional platform, and appreciate the ECO Secretariat for esteemed cooperation and continues support for Afghanistan.

Thank You!

Statement by
The Head of Delegation of the Republic of Azerbaijan
31 Meeting of the Regional Planning Council (RPC)
January 21, 2021

Dear Mr. Chairman,
Dear Mr. Secretary General,
Excellencies, Distinguished delegates,

Let me express greetings of my delegation to the participants of this meeting. I would like to congratulate the Republic of Turkey for the efficient chairmanship and the Secretariat for the effective work during such a difficult period, with full appreciation for the efforts to coordinate and address many important issues on the ECO agenda.

This RPC meeting produced an interesting exchange of opinions on where we stand and where we should be going during the near future. Our meeting takes place in soaring COVID-19 pandemics which altered the dynamics of our mutual engagement during 2020. Despite the economic losses COVID-19 pandemic offered an opportunity to foster regional trade, promote private sector and support resilient growth. With a renewed focus on trade, investment and growth, we can contribute to a swift and sustainable socio-economic recovery in the region.

On its part, Azerbaijan has been continuously working towards strengthening and facilitating the regional cooperation. As we always reiterate, Azerbaijan considers ECO as one of the important platforms of regional cooperation in our bigger neighbourhood. We consider trade, transport connectivity, energy, agriculture, ICT and tourism as areas of primary interest of cooperation and any initiatives and projects within ECO can serve the idea of a deeper regional interaction.

Azerbaijan strives to fulfil our transit and trade potential by transforming the transportation services into one of the key comparative advantages of the economy. With this in mind, Azerbaijan diversifies and modernizes its transport infrastructure, which also serves to the increasing the transit capacity of the entire ECO region. In this context, it is important to redouble efforts to facilitate transit, digitalize the operations and eliminate the regulatory and procedural barriers to transport and trade.

Another area of cooperation with great potential is ICT. We cooperate on Trans-Caspian fiber-optic cable connection to build broadband connectivity that will help to digitalise trade across the ECO region.

One of the perspective joint projects is the digitalisation of trade. This can attract more trade volumes. Today, online trading platforms in fact have more trade volumes and we could jointly promote such e-trade platforms with our partners in the region.

In the field of agriculture, we have made significant progress. Nevertheless, the cooperation should be further enhanced in this area.

We also consider tourism projects within ECO as a means of facilitator of people to people contacts.

Furthermore, we also appreciate ECO's ongoing endeavours to mainstream the sustainable energy and energy-environment nexus in line with "ECO Vision 2025" and UN 2030 Agenda. The establishment of the ECO Clean Energy Centre will fit in well with these trends. No doubt the next ECO ministerial and High Level Expert Group meetings on energy to be hosted by Azerbaijan back to back will enable fruitful deliberations and open new horizons for collaboration.

Important to underline the existence of need to revise the activity of the organization, estimate the value added so far by relevant ECO bodies. Program or project orientation may help in enhancing cooperation between the member states, as well as in economic and social development of the region. ECO Research Centre will foster the development of the new projects, deepening the cooperation within our organisation. We are looking forward to the signing of its Charter by the other Member States immediately after Azerbaijan at the nearest future.

Distinguished participants,

Conflicts, illegal foreign occupation and the lack of accountability endanger peace, security and cooperation in the region. It is an endless pleasure for me to mention that the illegal Armenian occupation of the territories of Azerbaijan, which was a threat to peace and security in the region, has come to an end. Azerbaijan regained control over its territories that were under occupation for almost three decades in violation of the four UN Security Council resolutions. Here we have to express the gratitude for the political support from the ECO Member States and Secretary General and praise the will to participate in the reconstruction of the liberated territories.

We have entered to a new stage of the conflict settlement, which is reconstruction and rehabilitation. As reflected in the joint statement on the resolution of the Karabakh conflict, all economic and transport links in the region are unblocked. It means that a new vital independent land corridor between Turkey and Azerbaijan can now become operational. This will open new opportunities for transport connectivity for the ECO region, including the Islamabad-Tehran-Istanbul railway project with potential to pass through Nakhchivan exclave of Azerbaijan.

New opportunities for development and cooperation are emerging and ECO can take advantage of the new realities. To this end, Azerbaijan is ready to work with its partners, including with the individual ECO Member States, to contribute to peace and stability in the region. We are ready for future collaboration.

Taking this opportunity, I would like to once again thank the Chairmanship, Member States and the Secretariat for their fruitful work in difficult times and wish all of us new successes.

Thank you.

Statement by
Mr. Seyed Jalaledin Alavi Sabzevari,
Director General for Multilateral and International Economic Cooperation,
Head of Delegation of the Islamic Republic of Iran
31 Meeting of the Regional Planning Council (RPC)
January 21, 2021

Mr. Chairman, Mr. Secretary General,
Distinguished Participants,
Ladies and Gentlemen,

At the outset, I would like to congratulate you Mr. Chairman on your well-deserved election as the Chairman of the meeting. I would also like to express my gratitude to distinguished Secretary General, Ambassador Soleimanpour, and his entire team at the Secretariat for making excellent arrangements for the successful conduct of this meeting of the Council, especially in the time of pandemic which has affected the whole world, including ECO Region. I am also grateful to all colleagues who actively participated in the RPC committees in the last few days preparing documents for our meeting today.

Dear Colleagues,

Regional Planning Council provides the Member States and the Secretariat with a unique opportunity to make ECO activities effective. In light of the recent reform, we also expect RPC to exercise its oversight on "to what extent the recent reform of the Organization, approved by 24th COM, will be effective for the ECO community, including for the regional activities among our countries, as well as for the regulatory and institutional backup provided by ECO rules and regulations and the Secretariat." This is also imperative for the Organization in light of implementation of the ECO Vision 2025.

Distinguished Delegates,

The potential intra-regional trade of the ECO Region is far behind realization. ECOTA is still hostage to procedural treatment. In our part as the Islamic Republic of Iran, we are prepared to engage in a process, as pragmatic and feasible as possible, to give a big push to ECOTA, and even beyond as envisaged by the ECO Vision. We are very much hopeful that the very promising strengthened sense of ownership shown recently by increased number of member states in ECO activities can be translated into a wider ECO trade arrangement as compared to ECOTA. In the same line, we proposed in this RPC to mandate the Secretariat to expedite implementation of a pending ECO Vision mandate on an ECO-FTA, through preparing a roadmap on how to reach this important goal. This should be in parallel with efforts for operationalization of ECOTA as well as other regional arrangements in terms of trade facilitation, trade finance,

investment promotion, harmonization of standards, etc.

ECO specialized agencies, regional institutions, regional centers and affiliated bodies shall be also utilized for realization of an old dream of increased intra-regional trade within the ECO Region. Accordingly, ECO Trade and Development Bank, ECO customs and trade facilitation agreements and arrangements, ECO-CCI, ECO-RISCAM, ECO Reinsurance Company, etc. shall be mobilized. We fully support any initiative by Member States and the Secretariat which contribute to this important but unfulfilled goal of our Organization.

Mr. Chairman,

We have always highlighted the importance of continued efforts to expand connectivity within the ECO Region as well as with the neighboring countries and regions. We believe that the RPC-sponsored work programme for the next year will provide opportunity for ECO to further realize its great transit and transport potential as a region connecting Persian Gulf and Indian Ocean to Russia and beyond, and China to Europe. The Islamic Republic of Iran continues to support ECO in this regard.

ECO is also expected to be more engaged in developing and promoting mutually beneficial relations with other regional and international partners. The Secretariat has illustrated a good image as a reliable regional implementing body for global agenda. It should continue to develop and expand cooperative relations with major international and regional organizations particularly within the United Nations system with a view to getting support for ECO to fulfill its socio-economic objectives.

Excellencies,

Before concluding, I would like to refer to the issue of pending meetings. The situation surrounding the Covid-19 pandemic has made "hosting of" meetings a non-issue. Therefore, we propose that if there is no interest among Member States to host a given meeting, the Secretariat undertakes to organize it virtually.

The Islamic Republic of Iran strongly believes in continued relevance and value of ECO for our region and our countries. We are determined to continue advocacy policy and approach towards ECO, its activities and machinery, including Secretariat and ECO regional agencies and bodies.

I thank you for your attention.

Statement by
H.E. Askhat Orazbay, Ambassador of Kazakhstan to Iran
31 Meeting of the Regional Planning Council (RPC)
January 21, 2021

Your Excellency, the Secretary General,
Your Excellency, the Chairman,
Dear Colleagues!

First of all, I thank you the Secretary General and Mr. Chairman for arranging the 31st RPC Meeting despite the challenges we are facing today due to Covid-19.

In light of that, all preparatory work brilliantly done by the ECO Secretariat is highly appreciated.

As we all know, the pandemic has severely affected all of our activities. That was the reason why the calendar of events adopted by the 30th RPC meeting last year, unfortunately, was not implemented in full.

But still, we were able to make most of the events happened for which I praise all of the member countries. For instance, Kazakhstan took part in 85 percent of all ECO events held last year. This clearly shows our country's adherence to the ECO Agenda.

Ladies and Gentlemen!

Kazakhstan, as always, calls for necessity of focusing on increasing a number of real projects and ensuring their cost effectiveness.

Along with that, we urge all member countries to stay committed to the core principles of our Organization.

The Regional Planning Council was working very hard for the whole last week. We thank all of the participants for their tremendous efforts resulted in a comprehensive Work Program and Calendar of Event for 2021.

We are therefore sure that all of them will be successfully implemented under the next Chairmanship for the benefit of our huge ECO region.

Thank you for your kind attention!

Statement by
Mr. Asad Rafi Chandna, Addl. Secretary, PD&SI
Head of Delegation of the Islamic Republic of Pakistan
31 Meeting of the Regional Planning Council (RPC)
January 21, 2021

The Honorable Chairman of the 31st RPC, His Excellency **Mr. Ibrahim Şenel**, Head of Presidential Office, Republic of Turkey

Secretary General ECO, His Excellency **Hadi Soleimanpour**

Distinguished Colleagues from Ministries of Planning and other relevant departments/institutions of the Member States,

Excellencies,

Ladies and Gentlemen,

Assalam-o-Alaikum,

Please allow me to complement our brotherly country Turkey for conducting the proceedings of the 31st Regional Planning Council Meeting (RPC), being the Chair.

I would also like to avail this opportunity to express my deep appreciation to Secretary General for making extra ordinary arrangements for this virtual RPC during the ongoing Corona Pandemic in order to ensure that the event is held as planned.

I would also like to thank our brotherly country Iran, that hosts the Secretariat and always facilitates the work of this organization.

I would also like to express my deep appreciation to all the member states for participating in this important event. The successful holding of 31st RPC, being a major event of ECO, in the midst of the pandemic, needs thorough appreciation. This reflects the political will of the Member States as well as the capacity of the organization to adapt in the given circumstances and needs.

Excellencies,

We have many commonalities in our ECO region ranging from common history and culture to shared values. The nature has also blessed us with abundant resources, a diverse climate and strategic geographical location.

ECO is an invaluable platform to further strengthen our bonds through promoting connectivity & People to People contacts, promoting intra-regional trade and enhancing economic cooperation among the Member States.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

During contemporary times, the focus of international politics and diplomacy is shifted towards economic progress.

Natural resources are an important strength of our region. Our shared history, common borders, outlook towards common problems and cultural affinities further complement our strong ties. However, these strengths need effective channelization and a common strategy to synergize our endeavors for the collective progress & prosperity of our peoples.

Excellencies,

During 2020, the Corona Pandemic has severely hampered the World's economy and has affected each and every individual on the globe. Countries could not escape from the disastrous effects of this pandemic and are struggling until now to overcome its unimaginable impact.

Nevertheless, while this pandemic has posed a major challenge to all of us, it has also presented us with numerous opportunities such as:

Firstly, it has changed the landscapes of physical interaction and conduct of official business. Now virtual events are being held to avoid the need to physically attend the events.

Secondly, the countries have realized the importance of mutual cooperation in the field of communicable and infectious diseases as well.

Thirdly, the countries have become cognizant of the importance of trade, investment and tourism being the three major sectors badly affected due to Covid-19 and the need to find ways to insulate themselves from such outbreaks in future.

Lastly, a greater realization that a transnational or multilateral approach is required to tackle our contemporary issues which no country can sort out in its individual capacity.

Excellencies,

We must appreciate that in the form of ECO, we have a regional multilateral platform available to formulate a collective response and policy for our common issues.

Given the current challenges, the ECO has done well in developing Covid-19 guidelines to facilitate trade and movement of goods and persons at the border crossing points and organizing most of the events online during 2020. However, we can further extend this good work.

As we have seen during this RPC that various events or ministerial meetings were held in the past but they were not held at a regular interval which is required in order to monitor our progress. Significant gaps in between such events hinder progress on important issues.

In order to overcome this issue, we need to develop and follow a calendar of events to assure continuity and consistency. If it's not possible for the participants to physically attend any event, it may be held virtually on agreed dates. Similarly, if no country is able to host any event, the Secretariat may host it at the agreed dates so that we move forward as planned.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

“ECO Vision 2025”, adopted during the 13th ECO Summit in Islamabad is a key document to assess progress made thus far.

Since 2017, ECO has managed to make progress in bringing administrative and fiscal reforms for improving its efficiency and ensuring proportionate representation of the Member States commensurate with their political commitment towards the ECO.

Other tangible outcomes include operationalization of the transport and economic corridors especially KTAI and ITI.

Excellencies,

Today, our intra-regional trade is less than 8% of region’s aggregate and is in stark contrast to other regional groupings such as the EU where the intra-region trade stands above 70%.

Successes of other regional groupings such as EU or ASEAN need to be emulated with the aim of establishing integrated markets and production facilities in the ECO region. Concerted collective efforts are needed to realize this objective.

Though we have a flagship preferential trade agreement in the form of ECO Trade Agreement or ECOTA, however, it is yet to become operational since its inception in 2003.

To address this longstanding issue, Pakistan has already presented its suggestions to the Secretariat. Briefly, the ECOTA Council should be authorised to make important decisions during their deliberations; all the ECO Members shall consider joining this agreement; the agreement shall ensure taking care of interests of all the members as we can only benefit from it if it is a win-win for all.

We hope that during the 9th ECOTA Council Meeting that Pakistan has volunteered to host, the experts from the member states would be able to bridge their divergent views and come up with a viable way forward.

Similarly, we hope that different initiatives of ECO that are aimed at promoting investment in the region, may succeed such as Agreement for Promotion and Protection of Investment, establishment of ECO Re-Insurance Company and agreement on matters related to taxation etc.

Excellencies,

It is a matter of rejoice that the ITI Cargo Train is likely to resume its operation soon. The operationalization of KTAI and ITI corridors, in addition to other planned road and railway corridors is an encouraging and much awaited development.

Pakistan, for its part, is upgrading its rail and road infrastructure to facilitate smooth flow of goods with our neighbours. We would welcome any assistance from the ECO to enable us to prepare bankable projects in this regard to invite foreign investment.

With regards to financing regional projects, we wish to see our ECO Trade Development Bank further expanded to achieve the benchmark capital requirement of 1 billion USD, so that it would establish itself as a fully functional regional financial

instrument, that is able to finance regional projects and assist the Member States through provision of finances for bankable projects. We, therefore, urge other members, who have not done so, to sign and ratify its Charter.

We also believe that with the help of ECO-Trade Development Bank (ECO-TDB), we are able to form an ECO Clearing Union or forge cooperation with the Asian Clearing Union to facilitate payments and thereby promote intra-regional trade.

Excellencies,

To make ECO more representative, financially empowered and organizationally strengthened, the Specialized Agencies of ECO such as ECO Cultural Institute (Tehran), ECO Science Foundation (Islamabad) and ECO Educational Institute (Ankara) also need our attention and support.

It is necessary that all the ECO Members should join these specialized agencies, ratify the respective charters and lend their full material and active support to empower them to function.

We need to make best use of these important specialized bodies in order to mainstream their work and make them more relevant and robust.

Mr. Chairman!

During the last year, under able guidance of Turkey and the Secretary General, the Organization has managed to further accelerate the pace of economic cooperation among the Member States where it was left under the Chairmanship of Tajikistan.

However, the progress needs a steady pace with a vision to create strong Institutional, Ministerial and governmental linkages among the Member States. I will take this opportunity to layout my considerations for the respected participants as major takeaways of 31st RPC:

- i. A common understanding among the member states to transform the ECO region into a zone of economic growth and collective prosperity.
- ii. A strong commitment for enhanced regional cooperation and political will in all the priority areas of ECO such as Trade & Investment, Transport & Communication, Energy & Environment, Tourism, Agriculture & Industry, Sustainable Development, Judicial and Parliamentary Coordination.
- iii. Collective endeavors for promoting labour and capital mobility through improved access to transport, information and opportunities and through simplifying issuance of visas and procedures at the border crossing points;
- iv. Efforts to expand our share in global exports especially commercial services sector i.e. transport, logistics, tourism etc.;
- v. A study to identify commodity level trade complementarities based on comparative advantage indicators to provide evidence and impetus for making ECOTA an effective instrument;
- vi. A commitment to eliminate Non-Tariff Barriers (NTBs) and improving infrastructure connectivity;

- vii. A commitment of the ECO Secretariat to focus on concrete deliverables in the economic sphere and consolidating ECO's mandate to avoid the temptation of overstressing its capacity;
- viii. Holding of virtual events instead of postponing events which often happens due to conflicting schedules of the participants from the Member States;

I thank you!

**Statement by
Mr. Shahabuddin Ortikov, Advisor to the Minister of Economy and Poverty
Reduction, Head of Delegation of the Republic of Uzbekistan
31 Meeting of the Regional Planning Council (RPC)
January 21, 2021**

**Dear Mr. Chairman!
Dear Secretary General!
Dear heads of delegations!
Ladies and Gentlemen!**

At the beginning of my speech, let me first of all express my gratitude to the Secretary General, His Excellency Mr. Hadi Soleimanpur for his active work and efforts to development of the ECO.

Dear meeting participants,

Uzbekistan is a supporter of the consistent development of regional cooperation, the achievement of economic prosperity on the basis of mutual cooperation and, based on the goals and principles of the ECO, makes appropriate efforts to expand mutual cooperation within the Organization in order to achieve the common development and prosperity of our states.

In this regard, we consider the next meeting of the ECO RPC as another opportunity to discuss issues of interaction between the countries of our region and, first of all, topical issues of regional economic cooperation and outline long-term plans for our interaction and cooperation.

I would also like to note the four main priorities for the further socio-economic development of the country, which were outlined by the President of the country in a message addressed to Parliament, these are improving the country's investment climate, developing IT technologies, innovations and Public Private Partnership.

Speaking about the prospects of our cooperation within the framework of the ECO, in our opinion, the most urgent tasks for the countries of the organization should be the development of transport and transit communications.

Uzbekistan attaches paramount importance to the development of transit and transport opportunities in the region and supports the efforts of the ECO to form a modern and developed communications system. In this context, I would like to briefly touch upon on the very promising areas that open up for our countries in using the communication potential of our region, taking into account modern realities.

These are the largest regional projects, such as the International Trans-Afghan Transport Corridor, which runs through the territory of Uzbekistan, Afghanistan, Iran and further to the seaports of the Persian Gulf, the Uzbekistan-Turkmenistan-Iran-Oman transport corridor and the China-Kyrgyzstan -Uzbekistan railway corridor ". These projects can open up tremendous opportunities for the reaching of our countries to the world market and are of strategic importance for the entire region as a whole.

We hope that the steps taken within the ECO to strengthen and the development of transport communications, their integration into international transport corridors will give an additional impetus to the further development of regional economic cooperation and strengthening of stability.

We are confident that these projects can open up tremendous opportunities for our countries to enter the world market, significantly reduce the cost and timing of cargo transportation and give an additional impetus to the further development of economic cooperation and strengthening the stability of the region. Uzbekistan is ready to fully make all the necessary efforts, together with the countries of the region, in the practical implementation of these projects.

We share the views and proposals on the need to develop mutual trade in the ECO region, to comprehensively promote the building up of mutual exchanges in this area, and to eliminate unnecessary barriers.

Today, Uzbekistan, which has sufficient industrial potential, exports a large range of highly competitive products of its own production to many countries of the world, can offer its close neighbors a wide range of quality goods, such as automotive and agricultural machinery, electrical products, mineral fertilizers, petrochemical products, cotton fiber and textiles, fresh and processed fruits and vegetables, pharmaceuticals, building materials and many others.

According to the results of January-December 2020 Uzbekistan's foreign trade turnover amounted to \$ 36.3 billion, which is 13% or \$ 5.5 billion less compared to the corresponding period last year.

Among the leading trade partners of Uzbekistan are the ECO member countries, in particular, Kazakhstan (3.0 billion), Turkey (2.1 billion US dollars), Kyrgyzstan (903 million US dollars), Afghanistan (777 million US dollars). In this context, I would like to state that Uzbekistan is also interested in increasing trade and developing trade and economic cooperation with other ECO member countries. One of the priority areas within the ECO for Uzbekistan is cooperation in the field of investment.

Currently, Uzbekistan is making active efforts to expand investment cooperation with neighboring states, joint implementation of projects of various scales in promising and demanded industries, and in this regard, we propose the establishment of

interaction in this direction within the ECO, which, undoubtedly, will stimulate our common economic development.

Dear meeting participants,

The ECO region has an enormous tourism potential, which will enable the Member States, incl. Uzbekistan to derive its own benefit.

ECO region with a population of more than 460 million people and an area of more than 8 million square kilometers, stretches from Central to South and South-West Asia and is well known for the diversity of its historical and cultural heritage. The Great Silk Road passed through the territories of the ECO member states.

Given the great potential in Uzbekistan, the presence of ancient, world famous and attracting millions of people from various continents such cities as Bukhara, Samarkand, Khiva, Tashkent, Shakhrisabz, Kokand, as well as the location of many shrines of the Muslim world, which are the heritage of the entire Islamic world and are included in the UNESCO World Heritage List, the intensification of cooperation in this area within the ECO will open new horizons and opportunities for the development of the tourism industry in the Republic of Uzbekistan.

Dear meeting participants,

I would like to note that recently the Republic of Uzbekistan has significantly intensified its interaction with the Organization for Economic Cooperation. During 2019-2020, historical visits of the ECO leadership took place to Uzbekistan. In addition, the virtual meeting of the ECO member countries, the United Nations Industrial Development Organization (UNIDO) and the international consultative company in the field of energy "ECOLONER" to discuss the project for the creation of the ECO Clean Energy Center (October 2020); - virtual conference of the ECO on the topic: "Prospects and challenges of regional electricity markets: the use of trade and investment opportunities"(October 2020). These visits and events have given a tangible impetus to the development of relations between Uzbekistan and the ECO.

Dear meeting participants,

At the end of my speech, I would like to express my sincere gratitude to the esteemed ECO Secretary General H. Soleimanpur, thank him for the high organization of our meeting and express the hope that the sectoral meetings will also be fruitful in terms of the long-term planning of our joint activities.

Thank you for attention.

Statement by
Ms. Çimen keskin, Director Of Research And Foreign Policy Planning Department,
Ministry Of Foreign Affairs, The Turkish Republic Of Northern Cyprus
31 Meeting of the Regional Planning Council (RPC)
January 21, 2021

MR. CHAIRMAN,
Mr. Secretary General,
distinguished heads of delegations,
ladies and gentlemen,

It is a great honour and privilege for me to participate at the 31st meeting of the Regional Planning Council of the Economic Cooperation Organization which was organised virtually amid covid-19 pandemic. I extend to you all the heartfelt greetings of the Turkish Cypriot people.

At the outset, I would like to express our gratitude to the government of the Islamic Republic of Iran, and sincere appreciation to the secretary-general, the ECO Secretariat and H.E. Chairman Fatih Unlu for their precious efforts in making this virtual meeting a great success.

MR. SECRETARY GENERAL,
DISTINGUISHED DELEGATES,

The Turkish Cypriot State shares a common history and culture with the ECO member states, and is fully committed to the objectives of the Economic Cooperation Organization at large and the Eco Vision 2025 in particular.

EXCELLENCIES,

We have been participating in the organization's activities and events since 1992, and were granted observer member status in 2012, which was extended at the 23rd meeting of the Council of Ministers held in Dushanbe, in April 2018. Since attaining the observer status, the Turkish Cypriot state has been a dedicated observer member, doing its utmost to contribute to the work of the organization.

We have been a keen participant at the meetings of the organization at all levels and have co-hosted numerous successful eco events in North Cyprus.

In this context, I would like to reiterate our will to co-host "the 4th experts group meeting on ecotourism", "second workshop on capacity building and best practices on biodiversity issues", "workshop on protected areas systems", "workshop on

ecosystem services” and “the 4th experts group meeting on ECO-Tourism” with the participation of all member states towards the end of the year as long as the COVID-19 pandemic allows us.

DISTINGUISHED DELEGATES,

As you are all aware, almost all countries in different regions of the world, are suffering from the COVID-19 virus which has been spreading rapidly since 2019 and unfortunately it has caused more than 2 million deaths among almost 100 million positive cases.

After confirming the first COVID-19 positive case on 10 March 2020 among a tourist group from Germany, our government immediately took measures to contain the spread of the virus by enforcing curfews, lockdown and closing the air and sea ports. At the same time, the bill that included direct payment to employees and support for businesses and unemployment programmes was adopted. Thus, for a period of 75 days, in our country, we have managed to have zero positive COVID-19 cases. However, with the gradual opening of air and sea ports as of July 2020, the number of cases, naturally, increased up to 1971. Among those positive cases, 1713 patients recovered but unfortunately 11 patients passed away.

The pandemic caused a huge damage on the world economy and the economic fallout seems outlive the health crises.

Currently tourism, transportation and education sectors have been among the most exposed to major upheaval, and unfortunately they are the leading ones in our country.

Our country has emerged as a prominent tourism destination and a center of higher education in the Eastern Mediterranean before the COVID-19 pandemic. Nowadays the said sectors are in the process of a resilience planning to mitigate financial and operational exposure and adopting policies of better recovery in line with the global economic outlook.

The incoming flights and the ferry arrivals are still limited due to mandatory quarantine rule applied to all visitors arriving to the country irrespective of their nationality. Hotels, as well as transportation and service sectors continue to operate but at their minimum capacity.

In higher education sector, our universities have already completed the online first semester of 2020. On 1st September 2020, our government launched the student

support program which includes allowance, free quarantine accommodation and 1 free PCR test for every new registered student who arrives to the country.

The primary objective of our government is to provide and protect the public health and to support the leading economic sectors to support their resilience throughout the pandemic. This balanced policy helped maintain the covid-19 cases at minimum level, and let the economy breathe until today.

With the development and wider access to the COVID-19 vaccine, we are getting prepared to transform our public policy to the post pandemic era.

EXCELLENCIES,

Within the era prior to the covid-19 pandemic, the international environment generated a process of establishing and expanding regional cooperation among the countries.

COVID-19 pandemic has proved that the international and regional cooperation is the key to address the global challenges and identify common interests in various economic areas. We must mobilize our resources to reduce the economic effects of the pandemic and take measures to encourage trade among ourselves.

Finally, I would like to refer to the ECO Vision 2025 and underline the six priority areas of cooperation, namely “trade, transportation and connectivity, energy, tourism, economic growth and productivity as well as social welfare and environment” and reiterate our will to cooperate.

Thank you all for your most kind attention.

Statement by
Dr. Omer Kocaman, Deputy Secretary General of the Turkic Council
31 Meeting of the Regional Planning Council (RPC)
January 21, 2021

Dear Chairman,
Esteemed Heads of Delegation
Excellencies,

It is an honor to address on behalf of the Turkic Council the 31st Meeting of Regional Planning Council of Economic Cooperation Organization (ECO). Turkic Council is an observer organization to ECO since 2012. Since then, we are renewing our observer status at the ECO in every three-year. Insha Allah, this year we would like to extend for three more years.

Distinguished guests,

Most of the activities and objectives of the Turkic Council run parallel and complementary to the objectives and activities of ECO.

The Member States of the Turkic Council are also members of ECO. We highly value our partnership with ECO and ready to further develop cooperation in the upcoming period, in order to achieve shared goals in the region.

We have initiated the first step for the implementation of the Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) signed between our organizations in 2014. Our Secretary General Baghdad Amreyev visited ECO Secretariat in Tehran on 7-8 April 2019. This was the first visit carried out by the Turkic Council to ECO. During the visit, a Work Program was prepared to strengthen close relations between two organizations and implementing the items envisaged in the said MoU.

Dear participants,

Turkic Council aims to increase cooperation not only among its Members but also in the region and beyond. We carry out our activities in various fields of cooperation ranging from political to economic, trade facilitation to transport, tourism to education and many others.

We are closely following the activities of ECO which aims to increase regional economic integration and achieve sustainable socio-economic development in the region.

ECO and Turkic Council share a common ground of basic principles, priority areas, as well as geographical area of activity. We are well aware that by working together and using our potential benefits of mutual cooperation; we will be more successful in achieving our common objectives.

We believe collaboration and coordination between our organizations would contribute to our Member States and the region in different areas. In this context, we can jointly organize projects, training programs, seminars and workshops; first and foremost on **tourism transport, economy-commerce, customs.**

Excellencies,

There are many other concrete cooperation areas; however, due to time constraint we cannot mention all of them.

Unfortunately, the developments related to the pandemic affected our joint projects as well. But insha Allah in the upcoming period, by strengthening and deepening our relations we can contribute to the development, welfare and progress of our region.

Before concluding, I would like to extend my regards and wish all the success for the Meeting to achieve the desirable outcomes for the region.

Thank you.

Statement
by Prof. M. Akif Kireçci, President of ECOEI
31 Meeting of the Regional Planning Council (RPC)
January 21, 2021

His Excellency Secretary General,
His Excellencies Presidents of ECO Specialized Agencies,
Esteemed representatives,

I'd like to salute you with my heartfelt wishes of good health, prosperity and productivity in the New Year. I'd like to highlight some of the activities of ECO Educational Institute and the developments that has taken place since the last meeting of ECO Regional Planning Council.

One of the most important developments since the last RPC was holding of the 3rd Meeting of ECOEI **Board of Trustees** on 12 August 2021. The virtual BoT Meeting was hosted by the Ministry of National Education of the Republic of Turkey and attended by the respectful ministers, deputy ministers, and high level officials from the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan, Republic of Azerbaijan, Islamic Republic of Iran, Republic of Kazakhstan, Kyrgyz Republic, Islamic Republic of Pakistan, and the Republic of Turkey. The Turkish Cypriot State was also present as an observer state. The Secretary-General of ECO along with the relevant staff of the Secretariat as well as the President of ECO Science Foundation and President of ECO Cultural Institute along with their delegation were also present. In the absence of other presidential nominations by another country, I was endorsed as the President of the ECOEI for another term of three-years. The Board has reviewed and approved ECOEI's Scale of Assessments, its Annual Budget, and the Institute's Work Program for 2020-2022. You may find some of the activities of this Work Program in this year's Calendar of Events.

Another equally important development was signing of the **Host Country Agreement** between the Government of the Republic of Turkey and Economic Cooperation Organization Educational Institute (ECOEI) Relating to the Rights, Privileges and Immunities of the ECOEI on 23 July 2020 in Ankara. It is a tremendously important step towards institutionalization of the organization, whereby we establish a firm ground for its future activities. Currently, the Host Country Agreement is at the Turkish Grand National Assembly for ratification.

During the past year, the Educational Institute had to be very selective when organizing its activities and strived to achieve its targets despite the challenges such as COVID-19. We focused on projects that are high impact in terms of fostering development through education in ECO Member States.

ECOEI organized a joint **Seminar on Teaching Excellence** in cooperation with Isfahan University on August 5, 2020, via an online platform. The 3-hour virtual event hosted more than 50 academics and young researchers from all around the world. We also organized an online workshop on “How to Write and Publish Articles for International Journals” in on 19 August 2020 to improve the academic writing skills of 50 graduate students who pursue a Ph.D. degree in Isfahan University and introduce submission, evaluation, and publication procedures of scholarly journals to them. We aim to hold similar workshops with other universities in the ECO region to contribute to the academic output of the young scholars in the Member States.

We also organized a virtual workshop on **Distance Education Experience Sharing** between ECO Member Countries on October 14, 2020 in cooperation with the Ministry of National Education of the Republic of Turkey. Technical experts, heads of departments or general directors at the Ministries of Education of Republic of Azerbaijan, Islamic Republic of Iran, Islamic Republic of Pakistan, and Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus, Republic of Turkey and Turkmenistan shared their experiences in order to disseminate good practices among ECO countries in responding to the COVID-19 Pandemic.

The Institute sponsored a panel titled “**Mawlana Research in Turkey**”, at the 3rd International Conference on Mawlana Rumi, which was held virtually on December 14, 2020 and contributed to upholding of our common heritage. In the same vein, I am glad to share with you that we have completed the editing and preparation of the articles from the Symposium on Common History, Education, Culture and Civilization for publication. The publication will consist of more than 50 papers from 15 different countries.

We have also published a series of reports based on the results of the sessions held during the on **Language Teaching and Learning Workshop** on October 19-20, 2018 in Ankara. These reports put forward the challenges of teaching and learning ECO languages and encompass recommendations for both teachers and policy makers. Lastly, ECOEI has published its report on the research project on “The Status of Mathematics Education in the ECO Member States.” After a series of meetings with a group of scholars and education experts on the subject ECOEI commissioned a research report by two scholars on mathematics education in the ECO Member States, titled “The Status of Mathematics Education in the ECO Member States” which includes a comparative analysis of mathematics results in TIMSS and PISA in Azerbaijan, Iran, Kazakhstan, and Turkey. The project report has been finalized after peer review and published in December 2020.

The economic development rests on a capable, skillful and a highly educated society. As always, I -once more- want to highlight that "Every dollar invested in education contributes fifteen-fold in economy." ECO Educational Institute is firmly committed to support advancement of education in Member States, through supporting experts, educators, institutions and students. I'd like to invite all Member States to peruse our **Work Program** and to take part in our activities.

I hope this meeting will foster our bonds and strengthen our resolve to push forward amid global challenges.

Thank you.

Statement by
H.E. Mr. Sarvar Bakhti, President of ECO Cultural Institute
31 Meeting of the Regional Planning Council (RPC)
January 21, 2021

Honorable Chair,
Distinguished delegates,

It is a pleasure for me to address this important event on behalf of President ECO Cultural Institute.

Following the 30th Meeting of Regional Planning Council, ECO Cultural Institute has arranged a wide variety of cultural programs and activities. The complete report of the activities of our Institute is available in the working paper of the Committee of Specialized Agencies and Affiliated Bodies of the ongoing RPC meeting but our most important activities were as follows:

For preserving the historic heritage of the ECO region, ECI has organized several events. ECI held a webinar titled "Herat's Brilliance in the Art of Inscription" and free virtual workshops on written Heritage of the ECO region including: "An Introduction to Historical Documents and Reading Primary Sources", "Sigillography and Study of Seals", "Practical Techniques for Correcting Manuscripts" and "Comparative Literature and Cultural Studies".

Commemoration of the famous figures of the ECO region is one of the key mandates of the ECO Cultural Institute. In this regard, our Institute organized several lecture series and expert panels on prominent literary figures of ECO region including: Allama Iqbal, Kamal Khujandi, Abu Rayhan Biruni and Mohammad Taghi Shahriar.

To promote the common arts of the ECO region, ECO Cultural Institute held online training courses of calligraphy and illumination from September to December 2020. In addition, a calligraphy exhibition titled 'New Wave' was held jointly by ECO Cultural Institute and Iran National Commission for UNESCO.

ECI attaches great importance to women affairs and their key role in societies. In this regard, the webinar "Women and the Peaceful Possibilities of Being in the World" was jointly held by the ECO Cultural Institute and the Women and Peace Research Center at Allameh Tabataba'i University in November 2020. At the webinar, university professors and women's rights activists from Afghanistan, Iran, Uzbekistan, Pakistan and Kazakhstan gathered on the occasion of the International Day for the Elimination of Violence against women.

To preserve traditional festivals and rituals of the ECO region, on the occasion of "Yalda Night" (Winter Solstice), an international webinar titled 'Yalda, Regional Solidarity' held in December 2020.

The webinar was attended by ECI President, the spokesman of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Islamic Republic of Iran, President of Iran`s Academy of Persian Language and Literature, Ambassador of the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan, Ambassador of the Republic of Tajikistan, and Ambassador of the Kyrgyz Republic, in which the speakers elaborated on Yalda rituals in their respective country.

In area of music, our Institute organized 'Sazineh' exhibition which was the first exhibition of musical instruments from ECO member states held in February 2020 at ECI art gallery.

For promotion of tourism in the ECO region, a photo exhibition titled 'Uzbekistan at the Crossroads of Silk Road' was held in February at ECI art gallery. The exhibition jointly held by ECI and Embassy of the Republic of Uzbekistan in Tehran, displayed photos of tourist attractions as well as the customs and traditions of the people of the country. Also, ECI has started negotiations with the officials of Isfahan Province in Iran to explore ways and means of promotion of cultural tourism in the ECO region. Isfahan is a top tourist destination which has joined UNESCO Creative Cities Network as a creative city of handicrafts and folk arts. Besides, ECI has published a special issue of its "ECO HERITAGE" journal, dedicated to Isfahan. ECI is willing to promote the other major cities of the ECO region in its journal upon the request of the esteemed member states.

Finally, in line with the former consultation meeting between the three ECO specialized agencies and the significance of a trilateral partnership for further realization of ECO aims and objectives, a virtual consultation meeting between the presidents of all the specialized agencies was held on "The Role of Culture, Education and Science in Sustainable Development "on 18 January 2021.

Regarding new publications of our Institute, ECI has published 6 books and 3 quarterly journals in English over the recent months. Furthermore, the ECI has published the 1st issue of its new newsletter covering news of the ECO member states in two languages of English and Persian. The Newsletter intends to illustrate a bright, promising image of the cultural events of the ECO region. Also, ECI has initiated a series of meetings with publishers which have published books about the literature of the ECO region. In the meetings, the relevant books of such publishers are reviewed.

Distinguished delegates, Ladies and Gentlemen,

ECO Cultural Institute has a great potential to efficiently play its role in ECO cultural integration through its activities. However, organization of cultural events is subject to necessary support from the Member States and availability of funds. Taking into consideration the fact that ECI is mostly dependent on the financial contribution of its four member states, we stress on the urgent need for timely payment of annual contributions by the member states as delays would hamper ECI's activities.

ECI welcomes proposals from all the ECO member states for holding joint cultural events and strongly encourages all the member states to participate in the programs of the Institute. This will help the smooth functioning of the Institute in promotion of the rich common cultural heritage of the region.

Lastly, I would like to invite those signatory member states of the Institute to ratify its Charter and the remaining ECO member states to accede to ECI.

Thank You.

Statement by
Prof. Dr. Manzoor Hussain Soomro, the President ECO Science Foundation
31 Meeting of the Regional Planning Council (RPC)
January 21, 2021

Excellency the Chairman of 31st RPC,
Excellency the Secretary General of ECO,
Excellencies the Ambassadors and Delegates from ECO Member States,
The Observers, Heads of Specialized Agencies and Institutions,
Ladies and Gentlemen,

Assalam-O-Alaikum and a Very Good Day to you all!

I am very pleased to have the opportunity to address the noble Forum of 31st RPC meeting!

Excellencies, on behalf of ECO Science Foundation (ECOSF) and on my personal behalf, I express my deep gratitude to all the Member States and ECO Secretariat for their cooperation extended to the Foundation. Our acknowledgement and special appreciation to the Government of Islamic Republic of Pakistan for their patronage and continued budget contribution.

Ladies and gentlemen, the ECOSF fully recognizes that investment in Science & Technology builds strong foundation and helps in sustaining the economic growth, boosts community well-being and integrated development of any country or region. ECO region can achieve global competitiveness, if it ensures that the region has qualified and capable human resource, to develop and maintain the infrastructure and capacity, and keep pace with technological development. Thus, there is a convincing need to build a strong S&T and Innovation base for economic development in the region.

Ladies and gentlemen, the ECO Science Foundation continues to pursue the promotion of scientific and technological research and related activities with an end goal to raise socio- economic standing of its member states; however, with numerous hick-ups and challenges.

The year 2020 has been extremely challenging for the entire world. The COVID-19 has been a tough test. This pandemic has not only raised the expectations we have of science, it has also emphasized the fact that stronger collaboration & cooperation among nations to develop scientific solutions towards this global challenge. Therefore, collaboration across scientists and experts is a powerful way of bringing evidence and

scientific consensus to the attention of policymakers to make informed decisions grounded in the evidence-based research. This lies at the core of values & principles that ECOSF was established for.

Realizing this need for capacity building and knowledge sharing, particularly around the health sciences and practices among the scientists and research community of the ECO region to respond to COVID-19, I am pleased to report that ECOSF conducted the impact assessment, and hosted several virtual events by engaging scientists, researchers and policy experts towards this overarching goal. Pandemic has transformed entire businesses around the world. Thus, during the pandemic year, we had to adopt digital technologies to keep pace with moving world and organized numerous strategic events virtually. A comprehensive report has been submitted.

I am pleased to share that ECOSF encouraged colleagues in ECO member countries to contribute to an international book entitled; “**Communicating Science- A Global Perspective**” published by the Australian National University (ANU) Press in 2020. Colleagues from Iran and Turkey contributed chapters on science communication in their countries and the ECOSF team contributed the chapter on science communication in Pakistan. The book in PDF is downloadable free from the ANU Press link: <https://press.anu.edu.au/publications/communicating-science>

I am also pleased to report that the Foundation in 2020 joined hands with Beijing Technology and Business University (BTBU) and launched the “BTBU-ECOSF Joint Training Center on Scientific, Technological and Economic Cooperation” under the Belt and Road Initiative. Under the initiative, we organized the first virtual training on “Management and Development of Special Economic Zones” in December 2020. The Joint Center is funded by the Government of China.

Objective of this training was to build the capacity of professionals of the ECO region and beyond on significance of special economic zones especially in the context of industrial development and sustainable economic growth. **Over 150 participants from all ECO countries and a good number of Chinese participants benefitted from this training.** It is pertinent to mention that this training served as a strategic resource for the ECO member countries in developing effective and adequate policies for infrastructure development pertaining to the economic zones.

Dear Delegates, the Foundation has been working very closely with China Association of Science and Technology- CAST since 2017. Under this collaboration, ECOSF is focal organization for STI and science education in ECO region for One Belt One Road (OBOR) programmes. So far, ECOSF has facilitated the participation of 513 young students and teachers/coordinators/officials from Member Countries in the Belt and

Road Teenager Maker Camps, Teacher Workshops and Student Contests held in China. ECOSF has also been contributing towards the development; “Fusion of OBOR Civilizations” school curriculum in collaboration with IAP-SEP and CAST under the mega initiative of China- One Belt One Road. The curriculum is focused to promote global peace and harmony through education and technology.

The Foundation is also pleased to report that the Capacity Building Program on IBSE launched in Nur-Sultan-Kazakhstan in 2015; is continuing nicely in Iran and Pakistan. We are set to get Azerbaijan and Tajikistan on board through the National Academies of Sciences who have shown their interest, but the financial constraints and COVID-19 issue have hampered the plans.

Excellencies, it must be realized that the Foundation CANNOT pursue its intended goals and function even at its minimum acceptable level, without adequate budgetary support from the Member States. The fact is that over the last three years, the Foundation has been facing serious financial crisis; so much so that the Foundation had to cut down its core activities and is not able to even pay the full salaries and benefits to the staff! At the moment, we only receive the mandatory budgetary contribution from the Government of Pakistan, and that too in local currency at conversion rate much less than the market! Nevertheless, the Foundation greatly appreciates the support of Pakistan in keeping the organization alive.

However, Excellencies, the contribution from just one Member State cannot sustain the Foundation for long! This is rather a discouraging trend and negatively affects the motivation and morale of scientific community of the region and the small team of ECOSF; who have been working very diligently; the Foundation works with only half the staff strength. **Member States are therefore urged to pull the Foundation out of serious financial challenge on immediate basis by paying their outstanding budgetary arrears and contributions. That is the only way forward to let the Foundation continue its functions.**

The Foundation appreciates the Government of Pakistan for paying their annual mandatory budget contributions since inception in the year 2012, whereas, I.R. of Iran had provided partial mandatory budgetary support for the events within Iran in previous years but no financial support was received from Iran during 2020.

We call upon I.R. of Iran and other three ratifying member states- Afghanistan, Tajikistan and Turkmenistan to kindly make their mandatory contributions to strengthen the Foundation. The Member States who have not yet ratified the ECOSF Charter and its Additional Protocol, are urged to kindly do so at their earliest so as to

benefit from Foundation's programs and let it function at the fullest. It is very much hoped that Iran and Pakistan will soon develop a money transfer mechanism so that Iran can pay their arrears of budget contribution.

Finally, I would like to say that the Foundation is making all possible efforts to promote science, technology, innovation and scientific education activities in the region with the collaboration and support of International Organizations. However, the greatest difficulty we are facing is the non-payment of mandatory budget contribution by the member states. I assure you that if the mandatory budget is provided; the Foundation could do much better. I hope the Member States will consider our requests positively in the interest of promoting connectivity and knowledge based socio-economic development in the region.

I express my sincere thanks to ECO Secretariat for their efforts in convening and organizing the 31st Meeting of RPC virtually. I thank you Excellencies!
