

**Statement of the ECO Secretary General Amb. Khusrav Noziri
during the Proclamation of Sari as ECO Tourism Capital
*Sari, Iran - May 10, 2022***

**Your Excellency Mr. Ezzatollah Zarghami, Minister of Cultural Heritage, Tourism and Handicrafts of the Islamic Republic of Iran,
Your Excellency Mr. Seyed Mahmoud Hosseinipour, Governor of Mazandaran Province,
Your Excellency Mr. Bakhodir Abdullaev, Chairman of the ECO Council of Permanent Representatives,
Honorable Representatives from the ECO Member States,
Distinguished Delegates,
Ladies and Gentlemen,**

On behalf of the Economic Cooperation Organization, I would like to extend deep gratitude to the Government of the Islamic Republic of Iran and the Sari authorities for their excellent arrangements and generous hospitality to host the 264th Meeting of the Council of Permanent Representatives and organizing this magnificent gathering for declaring Sari as the ECO Tourism Capital for the year 2022.

Bearing great historical significance as well as being previously the Capital of Iran, Sari landscapes numerous attractive sites, including mountains, forests, sea, temperate climate and a variety of agricultural products that appear to magnetize the global tourists' attention, curiosity and their ensuing influx to the City. Because of its huge economic and tourism potential, the 3rd ECO Ministerial Meeting on Tourism, held in the Khujand City of Tajikistan on October 4, 2019, selected Sari as the ECO Tourism Capital for 2022.

As you are familiar, Tajikistan's Capital City of Dushanbe has remained the ECO's Tourism Capital for 2020-2021. Introducing tourism capitals sounds to become amazing and impressive phenomenon in the ECO's business sphere and scope. Today, we have joined each other for the proclamation of the charismatic city of Sari as the ECO's Tourism Capital for 2022 which is, indeed, a matter of great pleasure for all of us. I would take this opportunity to wholeheartedly congratulate the dwellers of Sari and people of the entire Mazandaran province, as well as convey my best wishes to them on this exciting moment and occasion.

Distinguished Delegates,

As per ECO Vision 2025, tourism occupies a central place on the Organization's agenda. It aspiringly envisages the transformation of the region into inclusively a peaceful, green and magnetic tourism destination. Therefore, making the whole ECO region a sustainable touristic point with diverse products and high quality services becomes our utmost priority. Based on this and the relevant mandate given by ECO Leaders, the Secretariat is well-determined to promote tourism industry through development of proper strategies, policies and projects in strong collaboration with our Member States. This will also, by and large, support the overall socioeconomic wellbeing of the region's community.

Relevantly, the ECO Secretariat is pursuing several tourism initiatives, exhibiting its firm intention and interest to encourage tourism and related activities for supporting the overall regional development process. The Launch of Sari as ECO Tourism Capital for 2022 is also a manifestation of our will to stand alongside the local communities to help them flourish, showcasing their tourism potential, capacities and capabilities at greater scale and sight.

In the last quarter of 2022, the 4th ECO Ministerial Meeting on Tourism, scheduled to be held in Bukhara, Uzbekistan, is expected to discuss various initiatives in the areas of transport connectivity, marketing and branding, visa facilitation, improving quality and standards in tourism services, multi-seasonal product development and cooperation among the public and private tourism authorities and local community. I hope that the joint commitment of the Member States will have significant impact to ensure the accomplishment of our targets which are aimed at securing sustainable tourism development in the region.

Excellencies,

As you are aware, playing a vital role to support regional and global economies, tourism is a vital source of generating foreign exchange, business and employment. It significantly contributes to boost productivity and shoulder overall economic and national development

process. Tourism is also an important contributor to the world peace through enhanced global understanding and cultural interactions.

Prior to the ongoing pandemic, the tourism industry had been the fastest growing sector, surpassing the world trade and economy for the past decade. The World Travel and Tourism Council (WTTC) figures for 2019 position tourism sector among top categories of international services trade in the new millennium accounting for almost 10.3% of the global GDP and creating more than 330 million jobs across the world.

Considering the resources, the ECO region is blessed with, the region as a whole could become one of the most important global tourist destinations. The ECO region historically used to connect and still it connects the Orient and the Occident. Our region is well-known for its natural beauty, as well as diversity of its historical-cultural heritage, echoing the memoirs of the ancient Silk Road and home to 74 UNESCO registered World Heritage Sites, though the figures do not reflect the whole potential of the region. During the last decade, international travel to the ECO region exceeded 87 million people, holding a total of 6% share in worldwide tourism arrivals in 2019. Considering the region's potential and population, the ratio between tourist arrivals and total international tourism expenditures is still relatively modest and there is a need for increased regional cooperation to have the optimum use of all available resources to augment regional tourism. It is also reflected in the tourism revenues as the ECO region has received an international tourism receipt of around 49.3 billion dollars, which account for only 2.72% of the global tourism receipts. The average total contribution of travel and tourism sector to GDP in ECO region in 2019 was 7%, which is below the global average.

The COVID-19 appeared to unfortunately bear devastating impact on regional tourism alongside its negative repercussions on other development sectors. As per scenarios portrayed by relevant organizations, the regional tourism sector shrank by 60 to 80% since 2020. To support the sector's recovery in a wider spectrum both regionally and globally, it is essential to have a globally and regionally coordinated approach by both public and private stakeholders for joint revitalization and enhancement of the tourism sector. To this end, the Secretariat has prepared a Plan of Action on Elimination of Covid-19 Pandemic Consequences in the Tourism Sector for Facilitating Recovery

in the ECO Region by applying global protocols to ultimately rebuild the confidence of travelers.

Excellencies,

The Republic of Uzbekistan, holding current chairmanship of the ECO, declared 2022 as the “Year of Strengthening Connectivity” for the ECO region. Therefore, I believe that along with further development of transport and transit, trade and investment relations and strengthening of touristic ties among the ECO Member States would contribute, at the first place, to the growth of people-to-people contacts in the region. We have the task to demonstrate our people’s enormous and diverse cultural and historic heritage, splendid natural beauty as well as current achievements in science, technology, medicine and other areas.

Moving to conclude my remarks, I would like to once again thank all the relevant Iranian authorities for their kindness and receptivity to host us in this beautiful city of Sari.

Stay blessed and progressive.