

**Statement of the
ECO Secretary General, Ambassador Khusrav Noziri**

**International Cultural Tourism Expo
Kish Island, Iran, September 5, 2022**

**H.E. Mr. Ezzatollah Zarghami, Minister of Cultural Heritage, Tourism and Handicraft of I.R. of Iran,
H.E. Dr. Saeed Mohammad, Secretary of Free Commercial-Industrial and Special Economic Zones,
Mr. Mehdi Keshavarz, Chief Executive Manager of Kish Free Zone Organization,
Mrs. Mohaddeseh Vahidimehr, the Exhibition Executive Manager and CEO of Sateen Institute,
Distinguished ECO Permanent Representatives,
Dear Participants,
Ladies and Gentlemen,**

It's a privilege for me to join you all at the Opening Ceremony of the International Cultural Tourism Expo in the magnificent Kish Island. I extend my deep gratitude to the organizers for inviting me and the members of my delegation to represent the Economic Cooperation Organization at this wonderful event.

The arrangements made and the hospitality extended to facilitate the participants here are excellent indeed. In this regard, I would like to thank the Government of the Islamic Republic of Iran and convey my special appreciation to Iran Cultural Heritage, Handicrafts and Tourism Organization, Sateen Institute and Kish Free Zone Organization.

The Kish Island or the Pearl of the Persian Gulf is famous for its attractive beaches and appealing nature. Moreover, one of the most significant trading hubs for oil and gas, the Island is

further known for its huge economic and tourism potential as well as the improved infrastructure and tourist facilities. Given the touristic importance and value of the venue, the organization of this International Cultural Tourism Expo at Kish Island has multiplied the scope and magnitude of the event.

Excellencies,

Cultural tourism is one of the most amazing and momentous aspects of tourism that promotes and facilitates a variety of activities within the umbrella of tourism. The World Tourism Organization defines tourism as the movements of persons, who satisfy the human needs for diversity, tending to raise the cultural level of the individuals and giving rise to knowledge and experience.

It involves the exploration of cultural and natural resources, historically preserved places, structures, museums, cities or such other historical values that are unique from the point of science and culture. Among other activities, it entails theaters, cinemas, art galleries or festivals. The cultural tourism, which increases the interaction between different cultures, makes shared values, develops positive images and relations of the societies.

Dear Participants,

The Economic Cooperation Organization (ECO) places the promotion of tourism on top of the Organization's cooperative agenda. Although the COVID-19 pandemic appeared to bear some severe impacts on tourism sector, the ECO stood firmly determined to encourage and support tourism activities in the region and make further advancement in this sector.

In recent years, ECO has introduced an inspirational and stirring tradition of ECO Tourism Capitals. This is an annually applied sequel process that involves selection of the Member States' respective cities for the purpose. Selecting ECO Tourism Capitals, the historical heritage and tourism potentials of the Cities are particularly taken into account. While the Dushanbe City of Tajikistan was announced to be ECO Tourism Capital for 2021, the Sari City of Iran is proclaimed as the ECO Tourism Capital for 2022. Currently, the ECO Secretariat is working closely with Iranian authorities with regard to the selection and declaration of Ardabil City of Iran as the ECO Capital for 2023.

In last two years, tourism sector has suffered a massive decline due to the pandemic-related travel restrictions and low demand of travelling. As per scenarios presented by relevant organizations, the regional tourism activities contracted by 60 to 80% since 2020.

The ECO Heads of States/Governments during their 15th interaction in Ashgabat tasked the ECO Tourism Ministers to take all necessary measures in line with other regional and global initiatives to address the challenges that ECO tourism industry is facing in the aftermath of COVID-19.

The 4th ECO Ministerial Meeting on Tourism is scheduled for November 1, 2022 in the Samarkand City of Uzbekistan. The meeting is expected to adopt Road Map on Facilitating Accelerated Recovery, Safe and Sustainable Development of Tourism after COVID-19 in the ECO region. Moreover, the 4th ministerial event is expected to discuss and direct compulsory steps and actions to mitigate the COVID-related negative effects on regional tourism. It is further aimed at making required 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 as well as local community of the region.

Distinguished Delegates,

On the initiative of Uzbekistan that also holds current chairmanship of the ECO; the 2022 has been declared as the “Year of Strengthening Connectivity” in the ECO region. This is a commendable initiative to help promote strong regional connectivity and integration as envisaged in the ECO Vision 2025.

The Republic of Uzbekistan has further scheduled the hosting of 25th Session of the General Assembly of the World Tourism Organization in 2023 at Samarkand. This high-level tourism event will undoubtedly attract the world media and tourists towards Uzbekistan, and in some way, the event could mirror the tourism potential of other ECO Member States.

Let me recall that tourism plays a vital role to uplift national economies. It is an important contributor to creating immense opportunities for inclusive economic growth and sustainable development of the ECO region through job creation, empowerment of local communities, regeneration of rural and urban areas, appreciation and protection of natural and cultural heritage.

The tourism industry has remained the fastest growing sector globally surpassing the world trade and economy for the past decade. The World Travel and Tourism Council (WTTC) figures for 2019 positioned tourism sector as one of the 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 that the ECO region is blessed with, it might be expected that the region as a whole could be one of the most important tourist destinations in the world. The ECO region is well-known for its natural beauty, as well as diversity of historical-cultural heritage, echoing the memoirs of the ancient Silk Road and home to 65 UNESCO registered World Heritage Sites.

However, the figures do not reflect the 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 increasing regional cooperation to have the optimum use of all available resources and boost regional tourism.

Iran is a great land that has four-seasons, history and culture, souvenir and authenticity with mountains and deserts, forests, plains and seas, cultures and traditions as well as an immense potential for attracting international tourists. The travel and tourism infrastructure of Iran like other ECO Member States needs further investments with a view to making this destination more competitive.

In addition, I would emphasize that the ECO Member States should consider relaxing their tourist visa policies against each other. This will encourage the tourists' flow in the region. In this context, I deeply appreciate the recent decision of Kazakhstan to grant to the citizens of Iran 14-day visa free stay in Kazakhstan.

Before I conclude, let me recall that culture is a component of variety within a country or between the countries, leading to the formation of international societies. Cultural tourism provides development. It is a social change agent that brings together the societies and promotes joint activities. The cultural tourism is witnessing an increased competition all over the world.

I reiterate appreciation for the management of the Kish Island and all the Iranian authorities who made successfully possible to organize this important event that would certainly promote overall tourism activities across Iran and other Member States of the ECO. Moreover, I am confident that this Exhibition will encourage enhanced cultural engagements and interactions amongst the ECO countries and peoples.

Thank you very much.