**Annex-II**

**Statement by H.E. Dr. Shamil Aleskerov, Secretary General of the**

**Economic Cooperation Organization (ECO)**

**20th Informal Meeting of the ECO Council of Ministers (COM)**

*(26 September, 2013-New York)*

**Your Excellency, Mr. Elmar Mammadyarov, Minister of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Azerbaijan and the Chairman of the ECO Council of Ministers,**

**Honourable Foreign Ministers of the ECO Member States**

**Excellencies and Dear Colleagues**

It is my privilege to welcome you to the 20th Informal Meeting of the ECO Council of Ministers (COM) in New York. I would like to avail myself of the opportunity to express my sincere gratitude to H.E. Mr. Elmar Mammadyarov, honourable Minister of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Azerbaijan for gracing the occasion. I am equally thankful for the participation of distinguished Foreign Ministers/Representatives of other Member States. Allow me also to place on record our deepest gratitude for the Permanent Mission of Azerbaijan for offering invaluable assistance in hosting this session.

**Excellencies**

Keeping the format of the Informal meetings in consideration, I would begin by presenting a brief summary of the developments in ECO agenda since the last formal Meeting of the ECO Council of Ministers, held in Baku in Oct 2012. During the period under review, important sectoral and ministerial-level meetings were held. The 23rd Meeting of the Regional Planning Council was held in Tehran in May this year. It finalized our Work Programme for the current year and efforts are underway by the Secretariat for effective follow-up of the decisions of the last Summit, COM, sectoral meetings and the RPC.

**Excellencies**

We are aware of the importance of trade in bringing prosperity to our countries, linking the economies together thus ensuring security and stability for the region. In the trade sector, several initiatives are being pursued by ECO for enhancing trade cooperation and increasing intra-regional trade to respectable levels.

For the promotion of regional trade, the implementation of ECO Trade Agreement (ECOTA) holds the key to a regional trade liberalization programme. Implementation of ECOTA as a preferential trading arrangement would help in liberalizing regional trade, thus marking an important milestone towards establishment of a Free Trade Area in the region. The ECOTA Cooperation Council in its meetings is actively taking steps to remove the obstacles to the implementation of the agreement. The 5th meeting of the Council to be held in Pakistan in October 2013 would decide upon the effectuation of tariff concessions under ECOTA. The Secretariat expects full support of the Member States in completing the legal and procedural requirements needed for speedy implementation of the agreement.

In view of the urgent steps needed to enhance regional trade, contours of a multi-dimensional trade and investment strategy have been laid down by the Secretariat which would be considered prior to the upcoming Ministerial Meeting on Commerce and Foreign Trade, scheduled to be held in Iran later this year.

A forum has been created for creating linkages among the trade promotion organizations of Member States, with the ultimate objective of enhancing regional trade through a variety of activities. Similarly, steps are being made for increasing cooperation in the areas of customs and e-trade.

**Excellencies**

Although the Secretariat in collaboration with the member states has been making efforts to enhance inter-regional trade, the existing state of affairs does not present a bright outlook. The ECO intra-regional trade over the period 2006-2011 stands merely at about 7% of the total trade of the Member States. I would take this opportunity to request the member states to give due priority to cooperation in the trade sector and make sincere efforts for increasing intra-regional trade in the coming period.

**Excellencies**

Efficient transport linkages among member states are vital for regional socio-economic development and serve as the foundation for regional integration. Accordingly, development of transport infrastructure remains high on the ECO agenda.

In the transport sector, the construction work of the Kazakhstan-Turkmenistan-Iran railway has been completed in Iran and Kazakhstan; and partially in Turkmenistan. It is planned to organize the test run on this route and to finalize all the formalities before completion of the project.

The rail, road and insurance components of the ECO/IDB Joint Project on implementation of TTFA have been successfully completed and a wrap up meeting of the Project to finalize the Programme of Action for ECO Decade of Transport and Communications and a Donors’ Conference to raise the funds will be organized in the coming period.

Concrete measures have been taken by ECO and the enroute countries to implement the Action Plan on the establishment of Islamabad-Tehran-Istanbul Road Corridor. Currently ECO is in contact with the UNECE and IRU to initiate a TIR Pilot project along this Corridor.

The Action Plan for activating the ECO White Card, approved by the 4th meeting of the Insurance Committee (Tehran, November 2012), is being implemented and training courses on the White Card have been held in the past year.

The 1st Ministerial Meeting on ICT and telecommunication (Tehran, November 2012) approved a range of projects and activities for development of the ICT infrastructure, services and technologies among the Member States, as well as enhancement of cooperation on facilitating international roaming, combating cyber crimes, regulatory matters, ICT training and education.

**Excellencies**

Energy serves as the lifeline for growth of our modern societies. Accordingly the energy sector ranks among the main priority areas of ECO. The importance of cooperation in energy sector is also evident from the varying levels of energy sufficiency among our member countries.

A number of new initiatives for regional energy cooperation have been explored and adopted at the 3rd Meeting on Energy/Petroleum, in Tehran in March this year. These include: renewable sources of energy, interconnection of power systems of ECO Member States, energy efficiency and conservation and establishment of ECO Refinery Association etc. The adoption of the Tehran Ministerial Declaration shows the willingness of our membership to actively cooperate in the energy field. Considering that the global focus on renewable and sustainable energy is growing, the ECO agenda will witness increased emphasis on these issues in the coming period.

The ECO Plan of Action for Energy/Petroleum Cooperation (2011-2015) serves as a suitable platform/framework for our energy cooperation and comprises a number of key areas for future collaboration. Implementation of this Action Plan requires concerted efforts by the stakeholders, including the Secretariat and the concerned authorities of Member States.

**Excellencies**

Ensuring food security and agricultural development constitute the major activities of ECO and its member states.

In the field of agriculture, efforts are underway to mobilize financial resources and implement the projects within the framework of the Regional Programme for Food Security (RPFS). The framework for establishment of the ECO Regional Coordination Centre (ECO-RCC) for implementation of the Food Security Programme has almost been completed.

In order to bring together the regional seed associations, the International Seed Trade Conference and the 4th General Assembly of ECO Seed Association was held in January this year. The event was attended by more than 200 private and public sectors representatives and seed sector specialists from ECO Member States. Meanwhile, the ECO/FAO-SEC Project on Seed Sector Development in the region (signed by Afghanistan, Kyrgyzstan, Pakistan Tajikistan, Turkey and Uzbekistan) has also begun.

For promoting industrial cooperation among the member states and to introduce standardized production methodologies, the interim coordination Unit (ICU) of the RISCAM (Regional Institute for Standardization, Conformity Assessment and Metrology) has been established at the ECO Secretariat.

**Excellencies**

Immense potential lies to promote and develop cooperation among our Member States in the health sector. Currently, establishment of the ECO Blood Safety and Drug (Pharmaceutical) Regulatory Networks and collaboration for achieving the health related Millennium Development Goals are amongst our topmost priorities in this area. The second Ministerial Meeting on Health to be held in the coming period would further explore new avenues for cooperation in this sector.

Human resource constitutes an important factor in the economic development of our national and regional economies. Appropriate and timely investment in this area has the potential to positively affect our development paths. To develop the cooperation in this specific field, a High Level Expert Group Meeting on Human Resource Development was held in Tehran which succeeded in identifying the priority areas for cooperation in this area. The First ECO Ministerial-Level Meeting focusing on this area is expected to be held in Iran in the coming period.

**Excellencies**

Due to the peculiar challenges this region faces, fight against drugs, terrorism and transnational organized crime has increasingly assumed significance for our member states. The importance of coordinated efforts to eradicate these forces and their negative effects on the regional economies cannot be overemphasized. Three ECO Interior Ministers’ Meetings held during the recent years further highlighted the significance of such collaboration.

A joint ECO-European Commission project titled “Fight Against Trafficking from/to Afghanistan with the ECO Member States” is currently under implementation by ECO. Efforts are also under way for the establishment of an Economic Cooperation Organization Police (ECOPOL).

**Excellencies**

Afghanistan represents an important land-bridge within the ECO region and plays a critical role in regional integration. Through its modest Afghan Reconstruction Fund, ECO has endeavoured to contribute to the country’s reconstruction efforts. ECO has actively been engaged in the Istanbul Process and remains committed to achieving lasting security and development through regional cooperation.

**Excellencies**

The Secretariat has paid close attention to furthering substantive cooperation with the United Nations system and other regional and international organizations. Our efforts are mainly aimed at securing technical and financial support of international partners for the realization of our goals and enhancing ECO’s standing in the international community. Directives of the various ECO decision-making bodies and the recommendations contained in its Plan of Action for external relations are being implemented.

A Work Programme with the Developing -8 (D-8) Organization is in the process of being formulated for the implementation of the MoU signed earlier. Modalities for granting observer and dialogue partnership status at ECO and for signing new agreements with international and regional organizations and states are now in place for outlining the ways to expand ECO’s mutually beneficial cooperative relations with international partners.

It is with pleasure that I inform you that this year marked the establishment of the Parliamentary Assembly of the ECO Countries (PAECO). We hope that with parliamentary oversight in place, regional integration for socio-economic development in the member states would further be enhanced.

The ASEAN-ECO Joint Ministerial Meeting mechanism offers the opportunity to expand cooperation between the two organizations. The 13th ASEAN-ECO Joint Ministerial Meeting, scheduled to be held shortly, is expected to take important decisions on how to carry forward the ongoing cooperation between the two organizations.

Assistance from UNIDO has been secured and efforts are underway for launching the next phase of the ECO-UNIDO Project aimed at enhancing the trade capacities of the member states.

In line with the decisions of the COM Meetings, the ECO Contact Groups at important regional/international organizations have been set up for furthering ECO’s relations with various organizations. A recent addition to the existing list has been the ECO Contact Group at Jakarta which aims at promoting our cooperation with ASEAN.

The ECO Science Foundation in Pakistan and the ECO Educational Institute in Turkey are now on path of promoting regional cooperation through their activities and events in the fields of science and education respectively. I would avail this opportunity to request the members states which have not yet joined these bodies to do so at the earliest and to generously support their activities.

**Excellencies**

Last year marked the 20th anniversary of the creation of expanded ECO. During the past two decades, ECO has strived to foster regional integration for sustainable socio-economic development of the member countries. A number of achievements have been made during this period. However, considering the enormity of the challenges that confront us, there is a realization that a lot still needs to be done.

We must realize that the success of ECO as an organization means the collective triumph of our member states. I would request Your Excellencies to extend greater support for ECO’s initiatives and activities in the coming period. I would take this opportunity to solicit your support in expediting the signing, ratification and implementation of the agreements within ECO’s framework, including among others ECO Trade Agreement (ECOTA), ECO Trade & Development Bank, ECO Cultural Institute, ECO Science Foundation, ECO Educational Institute and ECO Reinsurance Company. Greater efforts are needed to render ECO a viable and effective regional Organization and enable it to successfully implement the aims and objectives as per the mandate entrusted to it by the Member States.

**Thank you.**

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