

**Statement by H.E. Mr. Khusrav Noziri, ECO Secretary General
at the 7th ECO Ministerial Meeting on Agriculture
Tashkent, July 6, 2022**

**Excellency Mr. Jamshid Khodjaev
Honourable Minister of Agriculture of the Republic of Uzbekistan,
Respectable Ministers and
Distinguished Representatives of the Member States,
Ladies and Gentlemen,**

It is indeed a privilege and pleasure for me to attend this 7th ECO Ministerial Meeting on Agriculture.

I would like to express my deep gratitude to the Government of the Republic of Uzbekistan for hosting this important event in the beautiful city of Tashkent.

I am particularly grateful to H.E. Mr. Khodjaev for his valuable support to organize this ministerial meeting which is expected to make important decisions to ensure smooth implementation of ECO's agenda on agricultural cooperation in the region.

I would also like to thank the honorable Ministers and delegates of the Member States for their kind participation in the event to mull over some essential issues in agriculture sector which has gained an increased significance, especially in consideration of emerging global landscape that continues to pose and inflate agriculture and food security challenges.

Excellencies,

Agriculture plays a major role in economic growth and development. As the provider of food, it is a cornerstone of human existence. As a furnisher of industrial raw materials, it is an important contributor to economic activity in other sectors. Besides, agriculture is a substantial source of rural income and employment.

In a world that produces considerable quantity of food to feed its entire population, more than 1.5 billion people cannot afford a diet that meets the required levels of essential nutrients, and over 3 billion people cannot even afford the cheapest healthy diet. Global hunger has been

rising since 2014. Recent estimates put the number at 690 million people, or 8.9% of the world's population. In 2019, close to 750 million - or nearly one in ten people - were exposed to severe levels of food insecurity and around 2 billion didn't have regular access to safe, nutritious, and sufficient food.

If such discouraging trends continue at the current rate, the number of people affected by hunger will surpass 840 million by 2030, or 9.8 percent of the global population. These are the pre-COVID estimates which have piled up unprecedented pressures on an already undergoing system. The World Bank notes that "the impacts of COVID-19 have led to severe and widespread increases in global food insecurity, affecting vulnerable households in almost every country".

The COVID-19 pandemic has had devastating bearings on many regions that appear to be more than just a health crisis. It has negatively impacted food systems, triggered food crises, increased food insecurity, and further imperiled the health and livelihoods of hundreds of millions of people, mainly the fragile communities.

The consequences of the COVID-19 on food security have affected developing countries more severely. The economic and social disruption caused by the pandemic is overwhelming; tens of millions of people are at risk of falling into extreme poverty, while the number of undernourished people has increased dramatically.

Distinguished Delegates,

ECO's Regional Programme for Food Security (RPFS) represents our flagship project in the field of agriculture. ECO Secretariat in cooperation with ECO Regional Coordination Center for Food Security (ECO-RCCFS) and Food and Agriculture Organization of United Nations (FAO) updated the ECO Regional Program for Food Security (ECO-RPFS) according to the pandemic situation and will accordingly make its utmost efforts to facilitate moving towards the implementation stage for improving and enhancing ECO Member States resilience to such future crisis. Our High-Level Experts' Meeting yesterday has finalized the given program for consideration and endorsement by this august forum. Furthermore, we will follow necessary legal procedure to complete ECO-

RCCFS' transformation from a program-based organization into the effective, efficient and sustainable Specialized Agency of the ECO.

Accordingly, another fruitful outcome in the agriculture section is the establishment of ECO Seed Association (ECOSA) in Ankara with the aims to improve the infrastructure of the seed sector and to increase the trade volume and agricultural production in the countries of the ECO region. ECOSA has recently changed its Statute, making it possible for the Member States to be represented in ECOSA's governing bodies. I would like to take this opportunity to encourage and seek Member States' consideration to this end.

To date, ECOSA has organized seven International Seed Trade Conferences and Seed Trade Fairs. The 8th ECOSA International Seed Trade Conference will be held in Baku, Azerbaijan in the last quarter of 2022. In addition, the draft ECO Seed Agreement has already been circulated amongst the Member States and the procedure of its finalization is underway.

Excellencies,

The cooperation on Animal Trade and Veterinary Services under the activities of the ECO Veterinary Commission (ECO-VECO) is another priority in the field of agriculture. The 3rd ECO Heads of Veterinary Organizations meeting finalized and approved the Work Plan regarding priority activities of the ECO-VECO, which needs to be updated due to the outbreak of COVID-19. The First Technical Steering Committee Meeting will be convened in the second half of 2022 to expedite the implementation of the Work Plan of the priority activities of the subject commission. Signing and ratification of the Statute of ECO-VECO is essential for accelerating the activities of the commission and achieving its goals.

Likewise, ECO Secretariat initiated the small-sized project namely, "Establishment of standardized ECO network of Slaughter Houses and Reference Laboratories" according to the project proposals of the last Ministerial Meeting on Agriculture. The project was discussed in our High-Level Experts' Meeting yesterday, seeking comments of the Member States for its improvement.

Regarding the water scarcity in the region and the necessity for speeding up the establishment of ECO Center of Excellence for Efficient Utilization of Water for Agriculture (ECO-CEEWUA), the 3rd Working Group Meeting held in 2021 and the draft Plan of Action and draft Statute discussed and finalized during that meeting. Its feasibility study will be conducted by FAO in near future.

Distinguished Participants,

As the pandemic slows down economic progress and growth, access to food will be negatively affected by income reductions and loss of employment as well as availability of food in local markets. The regional conflicts and the resultant new international food distribution and access situation have exacerbated the conditions for specifically food-dependent developing countries.

ECO Member States need to strengthen collective efforts for minimizing the adverse effects of the present situation on their peoples, including through increasing efficiency in food related areas. We are also required to improve interactions amongst public institutions, farming community and agricultural universities. We need to apply new and relevant technologies in the region and the Member States may take necessary measures to ensure farmer's access to seed and fertilizers.

Likewise, investment is needed to accelerate recovery efforts and build resilience of vulnerable populations, inter alia, through coordinating our efforts with all partners and regional as well as international organizations, including the UN framework for the immediate socio-economic betterment in the post-pandemic situation.

In this situation, countries need to work together to strengthen cooperation during post-pandemic, which has affected more or less all regions across the globe.

It is important to ensure that policies do not distort global markets. Decisive and collective actions are mandatory to safeguard that the pandemic will not threaten food security and nutrition more, and to improve resilience to future shocks.

I am confident that greater collaboration amongst the Member States and their concerted efforts will lead us to successfully secure our shared objective for sustainable development of the region's agriculture sector.

Thank you for your attention.