

Statement of the ECO Secretary General Mr. Khusrav Noziri
at the Plenary Session of the 33rd Meeting of the ECO RPC
January 16, 2023, ECO Secretariat, Tehran

Honorable Chair, Mr. Orkhan Zeynalov,
Distinguished Heads of Delegations,
Dear Participants,

It is indeed a privilege to welcome you to the Plenary Session of this 33rd Meeting of the ECO Regional Planning Council. While thanking you all for your participation in this important event, I extend sincere gratitude to the distinguished delegates to take on their tasks within the RPC's Sectoral Committees to develop ECO Work Program and Calendar of Events for 2023 for final consideration and endorsement by the esteemed Council.

Felicitating the Republic of Azerbaijan on assumption of **ECO Chairmanship for 2023**, I would like to thank and congratulate the Republic of Uzbekistan for country's effective and productive chairmanship of the Organization in 2022. I am confident that this 33rd RPC Meeting and other important ECO events to be organized during the ongoing year under the valued chairmanship of Azerbaijan would make further achievements to continue the process of our shared progress and development.

The RPC, I recall, analyzes and evaluates the status of Organization's current activities as well as considers and develops some new projects and programs within our cooperative frameworks, specifically the ECO Vision 2025.

Despite the challenges emanating from the emerging global conflicts and unrest as well as issues taking place due to the post-COVID conditions, the ECO remained persistent to gain on its development targets based on the recommendations of previous meetings of RPC and other decision-making bodies of the Organization. The ECO successfully managed to hold various productive events in 2022, including the 32nd Meeting of RPC, Brainstorming Session at the level of Deputies Foreign Ministers, 3rd General Conference of the Parliamentary Assembly of ECO (PAECO). Among other important activities, some notable Ministerial Meetings, including on Transport, Agriculture and Tourism were also convened in 2022.

I am happy to recall that based on our expanded mandate for **project implementation** as per decision of the 25th COM Meeting, we have increased focus on ECO project-based approach. Total number of our projects currently stands at 37, while 23 are ongoing and under different stages of implementation. The number of proposed/new projects is 14. As compared to previous data in 2021, the number of ongoing projects has increased around 40 percent in 2022. To this end, we are thankful for the kind and continued support of this august Council.

Distinguished Delegates,

Progressing towards ECO ambitious targets, we maintain our resolve and consistency, giving special consideration to our project-oriented approach. A lot is there to explain our sectoral activities and priority areas of cooperation. A comprehensive version of my reflective statement will be shared along with Report of this important RPC. However, I would like to present the highlights of our core activities, focusing on trade and connectivity that collectively is an integral part of ECO Agenda for greater regional integration.

Our region accounts for 6.6 percent of the global population. The region's share in world **trade** was recorded at US\$ 927.8 billion in 2021, higher than in 2020 that stood at US\$ 711.3 billion. The figure falls below its commensurate potential in relation to the region's share in global population as well as natural and human resources.

Our intra-regional trade in 2021 was recorded at US\$ 76.5 billion, which is 8.2 percent of ECO trade with rest of the world. The flow of Foreign Direct Investments (FDI) to the ECO countries was recorded at US\$ 21.4 billion in 2021 as compared to US\$ 18 billion in 2020, showing a sign of good improvement.

The primary reasons for the low shares in world trade, intra-regional trade and still low FDI inflows included, inter alia, high costs in intra-regional trade and high costs of doing business, as well as lack of complementarities among economies of the Member States.

Presently, we are focused on: (i) trade liberation through a preferential trade framework to create trade flows and increase intra-regional trade and contribution to the global trade, especially exports; (ii) trade facilitation to reduce the cost and time of doing business to meet the targets of trade expansion and; (iii) trade promotion through focused activities for boosting the region's trade profile.

To meet all our targets, the relevance and necessity of regional connectivity cannot be underestimated as all our efforts would reasonably take us nowhere without properly established **transport** linkages. Thus, we place transit transport on top of ECO Agenda, concentrating on development and management in the region. We are working on several important projects to this end.

The commercialization of KTI Corridor, operationalization of ITI Cargo Train, implementation of some parts of KTAI Corridor and operationalization of ECO-ITI Road Corridor are the milestone achievements to this end. Some of other connectivity-oriented progress, include:

- Organizing the 11th Ministerial Meeting on Transport;
- Operationalization of the Geographic Information System Project;

- Commencement of the ECO Gate Project;
- Establishment of the ECO-TIR Associations Consultative Group (ECO-TIRACG);
- Preparations for establishment of Kyrgyz Republic - Uzbekistan - Turkmenistan - Iran (KUTI) Corridor and Tajikistan - Uzbekistan - Turkmenistan - Iran - Türkiye (TUTIT) Corridor;
- Obtaining observer status at Legal Committee of Intergovernmental Organization for International Carriage by Rail (OTIF); and
- Enhanced cooperation with IsDB, IRU, UNECE and UNESCAP.

On Energy, I may recall that the year 2023 is proclaimed as the year of “Green Transition and Interconnectivity” within the concept of Azerbaijan’s Chairmanship.

The energy sector witnesses important developments, particularly regarding establishment of ECO Clean Energy Center in Baku and approval of its Charter for sustainable energy transformation as set out in ECO Energy Strategy and within the conceptual framework of the UN "Sustainable Energy for All" Initiative. Underlining the importance that ECO Vision 2025 attaches to such end, I encourage all Member States to sign/ratify the Charter of the Center for its early operationalization.

The establishment of ECO Regional Electricity Market (ECO-REM) is another significant initiative that can be instrumental for the long-term regional energy sustainability. Still, our endeavours in this regard appear to observe lack of sufficient support from the Member States. I therefore look forward to receiving your kind support for the promotion and materialization of this important initiative.

On Environment, we acknowledge with no doubt that the climate change is rapid and continues to bear negative impacts on mankind, including livelihood, health as well as economic activities in various sectors. Our environmental challenges are complex, deep and serious, mainly due to lack of good governance, insufficient expression of collective interest as well as political will. Within the framework of Ashgabat Consensus for Action, the Member States agree to unite their efforts for reinforcing regional cooperation on environment and climate change. Moreover, efforts are being made at relevant levels for early revision and finalization of Framework Plan of Action on Environment Cooperation and Global Warming for ECO Member States (2016-2020) and the Work Plan on Biodiversity in ECO Region (2016-2020).

With regard to our environmental concern, we are focussed on another important project that is “ECO LandCare: A Collaborative Programme by the ECO Member States to combat land degradation, sand, and dust storms”. However, more and maximized efforts, consultation and coordination are required to guide our regional activities on land degradation.

Dear Delegates,

Tourism is globally acknowledged as one of the most dynamic and job creating sectors. However, it was severely affected due to the pandemic impact, including lockdowns, suspension of travels and social distancing protocols. Estimations by the ECO Secretariat indicate that tourist arrivals to the region shrank by 73 percent in 2020 and the tourism receipts decreased by 67 percent. Fortunately, the tourism activities resumed in the mid of 2021. The regional tourism experienced a mild upturn in 2021 with tourist arrivals increasing around 50 percent as compared to 2020.

Let me recall that the idea for selecting and declaring respective cities of the Member States as ECO Tourism Capitals was introduced in 2021 with the proclamation of Dushanbe, the capital city of Tajikistan, as ECO Tourism Capital. The cities of Sari and Ardabil of Iran declared as the ECO Tourism Capitals respectively for 2022 and 2023.

The 4th ECO Ministerial Meeting on Tourism virtually hosted by Uzbekistan in December 2022 adopted Samarkand Declaration and Road Map on Facilitating Accelerated Recovery, Safe and Sustainable Development of Tourism after COVID-19 in the ECO Region as a post-COVID general framework for cooperation. During the event, the Shahrisabz city of Uzbekistan and the Erzurum city of Türkiye were selected as the ECO Tourism Capitals for the years 2024 and 2025 respectively. The 5th ECO Ministerial Meeting on Tourism is scheduled to be hosted by Iran this year in Ardabil.

Another achievement in 2022 is the establishment of the ECO Tour Operators' Network. The Network unites 242 tour operators and tourism agencies from the ECO Member States and serves as a platform for sharing and refining ideas on actions, as well as a mechanism for acting together to promote the region.

Distinguished Delegates,

Agriculture and Industry is another critical sector which plays a key role to support regional efforts for development. Since the pandemic, our economies have been facing serious challenges concerning food security and nutrition, causing significant social and economic consequences, especially in the rural areas.

The 7th ECO Ministerial Meeting on Agriculture took place at Tashkent in July last year. The meeting mulled over certain aspects of food security, intensification of agricultural production and sustainable methods for agricultural development. The Meeting adopted Tashkent Declaration on Cooperation in Agriculture and Food Security in the Region and updated ECO Regional Program for Food Security (ECO-RPFS). Moreover, the 4th Steering Committee Meeting of the Regional Coordination Centre for Food Security (ECO-RCCFS) was held on October 6, 2022 in Istanbul to pave the way for implementation of RPFS.

Transformation of the ECO Regional Coordination Center for Food Security from a program-based organization into a self-sustainable institution is another project, funded by Türkiye under the FAO-Türkiye Partnership Program. The project aims at strengthening the capacity of ECO-RCCFS to provide systematic advice, guidance and information to the Member States for improving their food security and nutrition policies and programs.

On industry side, SME development is a key instrument in economic and social development and poverty reduction efforts and is included in the national development plans. ECO aims to enhance capacities of relevant government authorities through different workshops and training programs. In this regard, the workshop on “Sharing Best Practices on SME Support and Evaluation Mechanisms” was virtually organized in November 2022 by ECO Secretariat and the Republic of Türkiye. During the workshop, the Member States shared best practices, skills and exposures on their SME development activities.

Human Resources and Sustainable Development is another area of our prime concern. In this area, we have four main priorities that include sustainable development, disaster risk reduction, health and education. Based on the guidance of previous RPC, we have been working on preparation of the ECO Sustainable Development Performance Index in order to support national institutions in their assessments and planning activities towards sustainable development goals. However, member countries have yet to respond to our request for provision of relevant data and documents. Accordingly, we consider that establishment of a High-Level Human Resources and Sustainable Development Working Group to prepare both ECO Sustainable Development Performance Index and an Action Plan for enhancing policy coherence for SDGs will be useful to facilitate collaboration between member countries. For this reason, our RPC Working Paper proposes the formation of this Working Group.

Regarding Disaster Risk Reduction, the Secretariat in July 2022 organized the second Workshop on Disaster Risk Transfer through Insurance in the ECO Region. Furthermore, Regional Plan of Action on Disaster Risk Reduction and Management for Cascading Risk in ECO region was approved in July 2022 as well.

On Health, the adoption of ECO Action Plan on Health is a significant step to harmonize health policies in the region. Implementation of this Action Plan in the upcoming period will ensure stronger cooperation on regional health and related issues. The 5th Ministerial Meeting on Health to be held in 2023 is expected to consider and approve the implementation mechanism of the mentioned Action Plan.

ECO is also working to strengthen the **Judicial and Parliamentary Cooperation** amongst the Member States. Entry into force of the Charter of the ECO Regional Center for Cooperation of Anti-Corruption Agencies and Ombudsmen (RCCACO) is our remarkable achievement. Currently, the Secretariat is in touch with Iranian authorities in connection with setting up the headquarters of the Center.

Moreover, formation of ECO Police (ECO-POL) is also being pursued in collaboration with the Member States. Though a notable progress is achieved, accelerated actions and responses of the Member Countries are required to support our endeavors in this regard.

It is encouraging that the parliamentary dimension of the ECO is also developing. As you know, the Charter of the PAECO became operational in 2021 after four countries ratified it, and the first two PAECO General Conferences were hosted by Pakistan. The 3rd General Conference of Parliamentary Assembly of ECO Member States held in Baku in May 2022 was very constructive and successful. I call on the remaining Member States to consider acceding to the Charter of the Parliamentary Assembly of ECO.

Dear Participants,

Given the importance of Afghanistan not only as a valued ECO Member State but also a key nation in the region, the 15th Summit reaffirmed the Organization's commitment for supporting international efforts to provide urgent humanitarian aid to Afghanistan through effective, transparent and accountable mechanisms. The Organization is firmly determined to secure the objectives of the **ECO Advocacy Program for Afghanistan**. To this end, the Member Countries are requested and encouraged to come up with their valued proposals and way forward to assist Afghanistan, especially during the recently developed conditions in the country.

Moreover, the **International Relations** remain an important component of the ECO policy for development and progress as per targets of Vision 2025. Within this context, the ECO is determined to make continued promotion and expansion of its inter-regional and global relations. The commitment to enhance worldwide visibility of the ECO is reflected in our actions taken and being taken to expand the international cooperative network of the Organization, making the existing partnerships more active and vibrant, as well as knotting some fresh ties with regional and international organizations, specifically the United Nations and its various agencies like UNIDO, UNESCAP, FAO, UNCTAD as well as some important regional organizations, including OIC, SCO, CICA, OTS, ASEAN, D-8, IDB, IRU etc.

The UN General Assembly has passed a resolution on cooperation between the United Nations and the Economic Cooperation Organization in September 2021 inviting its Specialized Agencies, Funds and Programs to support ECO's initiatives and activities. This year in 2023, we stand geared up again for the biennially observed re-adoption of this momentous resolution to be tabled at the UNGA under the ECO Chairmanship of Azerbaijan.

Distinguished Delegates,

Today, the Council is set to adopt the **ECO Work Program and Calendar of Events for 2023**. I sincerely thank and wish productive meetings to all Sectoral Committees in their work to finalize the contents of these documents. However, I must briefly bring into your attention two essential issues that play very critical roles in the accomplishment of our targets planned and recommended by the esteemed RPC.

First, deep and dedicated **ownership of ECO by all Member States** is critically important. In the past, many initiatives, meetings, including Ministerial level meetings and other several opportunities for cooperation could not be realized due to lack of interest and quorum. We would like all Member States to participate in ECO events and programs for sharing their constructive approaches to ensure smooth and efficient implementation of our cooperative mechanisms in the region. In our sectoral working papers, you will find the relevant noting and observations.

Reiterating that the lack of ownership and participation does not only impede our progress and performance, but also hampers our efforts to timely secure the outcomes desired to meet our envisioned targets, I re-emphasize that this is our own organization that needs genuine and strong support from all of us to move forward in the pursuit of our shared aims, objectives and interest. I, therefore, urge all relevant ministries and agencies of the Member States to ensure their participations in every event and activity of the Organization.

Secondly, although the **budget issues** do not fall within the purview of the esteemed RPC, I would like to mention that the Secretariat has been working under restricted financial conditions due to delayed receipts of budgetary contributions of the Organization. Belated or non-payments of annual budgetary contributions break the momentum of our smooth activities, disturbing the efficiency and performance of the Organization. Support of the honourable members of this esteemed Council is needed and can be effective in facilitating on-time payments of the Member States' annual contributions to ECO.

Dear Delegates,

To conclude with sincere appreciation, allow me to once again thank all of you for your kind participation in this important roadmap meeting. I am optimistic that your constructive efforts in this meeting will lead us to achieving our targets during 2023 with efficiency and effectiveness.

Thank and wish you all the best.
