

Statement by
H.E. Mr. Khusrav Noziri, ECO Secretary General
at the 5th ECO Ministerial Meeting on Tourism
Ardabil, Iran, October 5, 2023

Excellency Mr. Ezzatollah Zarghami, Minister of Cultural Heritage, Tourism and Handicrafts of the Islamic Republic of Iran,
Honorable Ministers, Heads and Members of Delegation of the ECO Member States,
Excellency Mr. Seyed Hamed Ameli, Governor of Ardabil Province,
Distinguished Participants,
Ladies and Gentlemen,

It is a great honour and privilege to address you all at the 5th ECO Ministerial Meeting on Tourism in the beautiful city of Ardabil - **ECO Tourism Capital for 2023**. I extend my heartfelt gratitude to the Government of the Islamic Republic of Iran for graciously hosting and chairing this important gathering.

I am glad to recall the festivities we enjoyed in April this year while proclaiming Ardabil as ECO Tourism Capital for 2023, and making the event's other sideline activities which provided very interactive opportunities to the visiting delegations for having them familiarized with the city's tourism potential, infrastructure as well as its rich cultural and historical legacy.

Ardabil has long been a symbol of harmony between nature and civilization. From its stunning landscapes, including the mesmerizing Ardabil Dome of Sheikh Safi al-Din, a UNESCO World Heritage Site, to its vibrant traditions and hospitable communities, this city embodies the essence of Iran's cultural diversity. Being a shining example of the immense tourism potential that exists within the ECO region, Ardabil, with its open arms and boundless beauty, reminds us that tourism has the power not only to bridge cultures but also to create economic opportunities, protect our environment, and promote peace and understanding among nations.

Distinguished Delegates,

Today, we stand gathered again in this marvelous city, having the privilege to review the implementation status of the agreements concluded during our 4th Ministerial Interaction, along with revisiting tasks and activities defined within the framework of **the Samarkand Declaration**. This ministerial forum is quite important given its special mandate to assess ECO's collective strategy for improving and implementing our joint tourism projects and programs based on the real tourism potential of the region.

As envisaged in **ECO Vision 2025**, tourism sector occupies a central place in our agenda for regional cooperation. It showcases not only the region's remarkable natural beauty, historical heritage and cultural diversity, but also serves as a catalyst

to support economic growth, infrastructure development and employment generation as well as an effective way for cultural exchange.

Before **COVID-19**, our region witnessed very impressive tourism statistics receiving and hosting over 87 million of international visitors in the pre-pandemic decade. The figure remained attractive, making significant contribution to the overall economic growth of the region, including in human resources and export sectors. Although, the impulsive impact of the pandemic bore a notable decline in the region's tourists' arrivals and receipts during 2020, the sector started gradual recovery in 2021 and 2022.

While the sector is still in the post-pandemic revival process, we should be determinedly focused on the expeditious and steady implementation of our earlier adopted recovery roadmap, along with the provisions of **the Ardabil Declaration** to be adopted by this august forum today, to facilitate smooth execution of our policy-based and action-oriented programs for ensuring regional tourism activities at the pre-pandemic level.

Excellencies,

The ECO 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. Recently, the number of **UNESCO registered World Heritage Sites in the ECO Region** increased from 74 to 86 with the approval of new sites during the 45th Session of UNESCO World Heritage Committee in Riyadh, Saudi Arabia held from September 10 to 25, 2023.

On this occasion, I would like to congratulate our Member Countries and meanwhile encourage them to expedite their awaited updates for the new version of **ECO Chronicle** to be published by the Secretariat incorporating the updated information regarding the ECO World Heritage listings.

The Member Countries have a lot more to offer in terms of culture, pilgrimage, ecotourism, health and wellness, gastronomy and other types of tourism, all of which could attract tourists from different parts of the world. Keeping all this in view, the Organization is ardently pursuing its cooperative relations with other regional and international tourism stakeholders.

The 25th Session of the General Assembly of the World Tourism Organization (UNWTO) will be hosted by Uzbekistan in Samarkand on October 16-20, 2023. The event, bearing global magnitude, will decorate another stage to internationally promote regional tourism and cultural heritage, boost economic opportunities and enhance sustainability in tourism practices. The occasion will also help foster regional collaboration and increase ECO's visibility and positioning in the global scene as an attractive and vibrant tourism destination.

Excellencies,

The ECO Tourism Capitals initiative was successful in terms of showcasing the cultural and tourism potential of the Member States, promoting the region's tourism goals, and increasing the involvement of local communities and the private sector in regional tourism activities. Let me recall that the inaugural discussions on the idea were made during the 3rd ECO Ministerial Meeting on Tourism in Khujand, Tajikistan. The event designated Dushanbe as the first ECO Tourism Capital for 2020-2021, followed by the proclamation of Sari and Ardabil cities of Iran as ECO Tourism Capitals for 2022 and 2023, respectively.

The 4th ECO Ministerial Meeting on Tourism also selected the city of Shahrizabz in the Republic of Uzbekistan as the ECO Tourism Capital for 2024 and the city of Erzurum in the Republic of Türkiye as the ECO Tourism Capital for 2025. We are excitingly looking forward to the festive launch of Shahrizabz as ECO Tourism Capital in 2024.

Today, we are further ready to select the **Shusha** city of the Republic of Azerbaijan as the ECO Tourism Capital for 2026. The captivating and scenic view of the city will augment our efforts for attracting more and more tourists to our region with an ultimate aim and intention to support the socioeconomic wellbeing of our people.

Distinguished Participants,

This is a momentous gathering to fuel and facilitate our joint endeavours for regional tourism development. While wishing this event an inclusive success, I thank the Ardabil authorities for hosting us again, as well as my sincere gratitude to the distinguished Heads and Members of ECO delegations for their kind participation.

Thank you for kind attention.