



**Statement by**  
**ECO Secretary General Ambassador Khusrav Noziri**  
**Plenary Session “Tourism without borders across the**  
**Economic Cooperation Organization”**  
*Shahrisabz, Uzbekistan, April 26, 2024*

**Excellency Mr. Aziz Abdukhakimov, Minister of Ecology, Environmental Protection and Climate Change, Republic of Uzbekistan,**  
**Excellency Mr. Umid Shadiey, Chairman of the Tourism Committee, Republic of Uzbekistan,**  
**Esteemed heads of the delegation from the ECO Member States,**  
**Distinguished Participants,**  
**Ladies and Gentlemen,**

With great honour, I join you at this important Plenary Session in the splendid city of Shahrisabz.

I express my sincere thanks to the Government of Uzbekistan, especially the Tourism Committee, for hosting this significant event alongside the celebrations marking Shahrisabz's new status as the ECO Tourism Capital for 2024.

**Distinguished Participants,**

The ECO region boasts natural splendor and a rich historical-cultural heritage, with 86 UNESCO-registered World Heritage Sites, echoing the ancient Silk Road. Our member countries offer diverse experiences, from cultural journeys to well-being getaways, attracting travelers worldwide.

Before the COVID-19 pandemic, our region welcomed over 87 million international visitors annually. Despite challenges, including a decline in tourist arrivals in 2020, we have seen a gradual recovery. In 2022, amidst a global total exceeding 900 million tourists, ECO Member States collectively hosted over 70 million visitors, marking an 80% improvement. We remain committed to enhancing regional cooperation to maximize our tourism resources.

**Eminent Delegates,**

Under the guidance of ECO Vision 2025, our aim is to create sustainable tourism destinations with maximum environmental conservation. Preserving cultural heritage and biodiversity is central to our vision, ensuring tourism meets the needs of both current and future generations.

The 4<sup>th</sup> ECO Ministerial Meeting on Tourism, chaired by Uzbekistan in December 2022, was pivotal in shaping post-pandemic recovery. The Samarkand Declaration and the Road Map adopted at the meeting provide an effective framework for cooperation in the tourism sector.

The ECO Tourism Capitals initiative has garnered acclaim globally, with six cities selected so far, including Shahrizabz in Uzbekistan. This tradition is expanding, with potential candidates like Lahore in Pakistan, Marv in Turkmenistan and Karakol in Kyrgyz Republic emerging for 2027, promising sustainable tourism growth within the ECO region.

The Ardabil Declaration at the 5<sup>th</sup> ECO Ministerial Meeting on Tourism in Iran emphasized joint promotion and collaboration among Member States. The establishment of the ECO Tour Operators' Network and the upcoming First ECO Tour Operators Forum in Azerbaijan further enhance our tourism development cooperation.

In pursuit of education in the tourism sector, the ECO, in collaboration with the State Tourism Agency of Azerbaijan, hosted the 1<sup>st</sup> Meeting of Tourism Specialized Education Institutes in Baku. The resulting Baku Declaration lays the groundwork for addressing concerns in higher education on tourism, with the establishment of the ECO Tourism Educational Network (ECO-TEN) facilitating collaboration among academicians and researchers.

## **Excellencies,**

In order to achieve the targets outlined in ECO Vision 2025, Member States must adopt a unified and systematic approach, taking concerted actions. The following key areas and constraints crucial for the regional tourism sector's success deserve attention.

*Accessibility:* Enhanced intra-regional and inter-regional connectivity is vital to promote tourism both within and outside the ECO region. Exploiting various modes of transportation ensures comfortable, affordable and safe travel.

*Coordinated Promotion:* All ECO Member States must collaborate on mutual tourism programs to create a compelling and competitive image of the region as a tourism destination. Such initiatives strengthen institutional frameworks and foster cooperation between public and private sectors.

*Streamlined Border Procedures:* Cumbersome border-crossing and visa procedures hinder tourism development. Simplification, liberalization and automation of entry requirements are essential interventions requiring close coordination and commitment from Member States.

*Quality Standards:* Harmonizing service quality and environmental standards with international best practices enhance the region's competitiveness as a global tourism destination, attracting more international tourists.

*Diversification:* Diversifying tourism offerings into various niches reduces dependence on specific activities or markets. Investments in capacity and quality improvement are needed to reduce seasonality and enhance profitability in tourism businesses. The ECO region's potential allows for the creation of diverse tourist segments and experiences, addressing seasonality and providing year-round opportunities for businesses.

### **Eminent Delegates,**

At the 16<sup>th</sup> ECO Summit in Tashkent on November 9, 2023, His Excellency Mr. Shavkat Mirziyoyev, Honourable President of Uzbekistan, proposed the establishment of the ECO Advisory Committee on Tourism. Comprising representatives from tourism departments and leading specialists of Member States, this Committee aims to expedite the achievement of tourism sector goals. I fully support this proposal and its swift implementation, having been confident that it will provide a valuable platform for addressing the mentioned issues.

In conclusion, I urge ongoing collaboration among Member States to unlock tourism's full potential for economic development and regional integration. Let's work together to identify opportunities and address challenges, contributing to a brighter future for our nations and citizens. By leveraging our collective strengths, we can enhance our position in the global tourism industry and promote cultural exchange. I wish you all fruitful deliberations during this conference.

Thank you for your attention.