

Statement
of the ECO Secretary General H.E. Mr. Khusrav Noziri
at the 16th ECO Summit
Tashkent, 9 November 2023

Excellency President Shavkat Mirziyoyev,
Honourable Heads of State and Government,
Distinguished Delegates,

It's a matter of immense honour for me to attend and address this august forum.

I extend my deepest gratitude to Excellency President Shavkat Mirziyoyev for hosting us in the splendid city of Tashkent, and express my warm felicitations on his election as Chairman of the 16th ECO Summit.

I would also like to convey my sincere thanks to our Honourable Presidents and Prime Ministers, as well as eminent delegates for gracing this occasion with their valued presence.

Excellencies,

On the milestone initiative of the President of Republic of Uzbekistan, the proclamation of 2022 as the “Year of Strengthening Connectivity” proved to be an impactful vision, laying down the foundation of **year-wise conceptual themes in the ECO**.

This motivational concept is further followed and fueled by Republic of Azerbaijan which declared 2023 as the “Year of Green Transition and Interconnectivity” for their current ECO Chairmanship.

I am glad to note that this luminous idea is gaining steady momentum as the Islamic Republic of Iran has already announced 2024 as the “Year of Enhanced and Resilient ECO Region through Expansion of Intra-Regional Trade” for the country's next year's Chairmanship.

Excellencies,

We are transiting through difficult times due to the violent trends prevailing across the globe. In this context, the **significance of this Summit** has increased manifold as our leaders have gathered to review ECO activities and give fresh directions for improvement of the Organization in light of their exclusive reflections on the emerging regional and global scenarios.

Based on the aspirations of our leaders, especially their valued guidance given in the Ashgabat Consensus for Action as well as the targets envisaged in Vision 2025, the Organization is progressing towards its core development objectives in a

bid to make ECO a more integrated and socioeconomically advanced region. Respecting the limitation of time, I would like to give a brief description of some prioritized areas of cooperation in ECO.

ECO's intra-regional trade in 2022 contributed only 8% to the global trade, standing at US\$ 86 billion, while Foreign Direct Investments to ECO countries also remained below real potential of the region. The most obvious reasons for our low share in world trade, our insufficient intra-regional trade and less FDI include, inter alia, the absence of any preferential trade and lack of any in-place trade facilitation mechanism in the region.

The ECO Trade Agreement (ECOTA) and the Agreement on Promotion and Protection of Investment (APPI) are our flagship projects which are aimed at making accelerated promotion of regional trade activities. However, both agreements have yet to be implemented pending some administrative and technical issues amongst the signatory countries.

While the Organization is in process of figuring out alternative ways for boosting the region's trade profile, mainly by trade expansion through trade facilitation and customs cooperation, all Member States are asked to be equally receptive and forthcoming to ensure effective and efficient implementation of these important ECO trade frameworks.

I am confident that the **5th Business Forum**, which has been successfully organized by Uzbekistan on the sidelines of this Summit yesterday, will support our endeavours to enhancing regional trade and investment. In this regard, I appreciate the Government of Uzbekistan for their active and impactful involvement in advancing the goals of ECO.

Excellencies,

We are also making persistent efforts for **strengthening regional connectivity** through improved management of corridors, and promotion of digitalized modes of transportation in the region. Our major initiatives, to this end, are to develop and improve various corridors, including the Trans-Caspian and Almaty-Tehran-Istanbul Corridors, Bandar Abbas- Almaty Corridor, Kazakhstan-Turkmenistan-Iran (KTI) and Kyrgyzstan-Tajikistan-Afghanistan-Iran (KTAI) Corridors and the extension of Islamabad-Tehran-Istanbul Rail Corridor to Europe, which is ECO's inaugural initiative to link South Asia with Europe.

Within the scope of connectivity for greater integration, ECO is also focused on providing our landlocked countries with strong intra- and inter-regional linkages. Relevantly, the designation of Samarkand and Gabala International Airports as **ECO Air Hubs** in the 12th Ministerial Meeting on Transport held a week ago in Tashkent have been among the major developments in regional civil aviation that could effectively enhance air connectivity of our region.

In addition, the recently instituted Kyrgyzstan-Uzbekistan-Turkmenistan-Iran-Türkiye (KUTIT) and Tajikistan-Uzbekistan-Turkmenistan-Iran-Türkiye (TUTIT) Multimodal Corridors as well as the Azerbaijan-Iran-Nakhchivan Corridor are expected to further contribute to regional and international connectedness of our people.

Excellencies,

Energy is another priority area in ECO. The establishment of ECO Clean Energy Center in Baku is a significant step towards enhancing regional cooperation for energy security and development of efficient energy resources. So far, only Azerbaijan and Türkiye have signed the Charter of the Center. Availing this opportunity, I request kind patronization of our leaders so that signing of this Charter by other esteemed member countries may be ensured for timely operationalization of the Center.

Another important initiative is ECO Regional Electricity Market (ECO-REM), aiming at mobilization of energy resources and development of an integrated electricity market in the region. For an expedited launching and operationalization of the project, the Organization is collaborating with its international partners, including Energy Charter and UNESCAP.

Our **other significant initiatives** to enhance multifarious regional cooperation in tourism, food security and environment include: (i) ECO Tourism Action Plan; (ii) ECO Regional Program for Food Security; (iii) Transformation of ECO Regional Coordination Center for Food Security (ECO-RCCFS) from a program-based organization into a self-sustainable institution; and (iv) the High-Level Dialogue Platform on Environmental Cooperation with the participation of international scientists and experts, which was established on the judicious initiative of President Shavkat Mirziyoyev.

Environmental protection and ensuring sustainable urbanization is one of the most desired areas of our cooperative framework. In this regard, we acknowledge the importance of Turkmenistan's recently launched modern city of Arkadag. We believe that the organization of **First Sustainable Development Forum** in Arkadag will portray the city as an inspirational model and effectively promote our sustainable development targets.

Excellencies,

We are further focused and committed to showcasing the region's vast but untapped tourism potential. In this context, the concept of **ECO Tourism Capitals** is quite successful. So far, six important cities of the region have been selected as ECO Tourism Capitals, including the Dushanbe City of Tajikistan (2020-2021), the Sari and Ardabil Cities of Iran (2022 and 2023), the Shahrizabz City of Uzbekistan (2024), the Erzurum City of Türkiye (2025) and the Shusha City of Azerbaijan

(2026). The selection of ECO Tourism Capitals is a regular exercise aimed at promoting the region's rich natural and cultural heritage as well as broadening international visibility of our diverse and beautiful cities.

Excellencies,

We have an increased focus on our interactive policy to enhance **ECO visibility** in the global domain of activities. Our international commitment is to secure and enhance the socioeconomic interest of our region, along with efforts for increasing global cooperation and harmony.

In this context, I am glad to bring in kind notice of our leadership that a biennial **resolution on UN-ECO Cooperation** has been adopted by 77th Session of UNGA on August 25, 2023. I am confident that this important document will further augment the ECO relations with the UN and its various Specialized Agencies, making them more vibrant, consolidated and multidimensional. Noteworthy to flag that ECO has successfully completed 30 years of its observer-ship in the United Nations General Assembly, which was granted in October 1993.

In addition to this, the ECO relations with other international organizations are significantly growing. On the sidelines of 78th UNGA Session in New York, the **15th ECO-ASEAN Joint Ministerial Meeting** was successfully organized. The two sides agreed to accelerate activities in all areas of their common interest.

Furthermore, given the expanding role of parliamentary diplomacy in international relations, the importance of the **Parliamentary Assembly of ECO Member States** (PAECO) is increasing. So far, PAECO has held three General Conferences. To be hosted by Iran in 2024, the 4th PAECO meeting is expected to make further advancements in our regional parliamentary relations.

Excellencies,

ECO attaches utmost importance to Afghanistan and its participation in the Organization's activities. Unfortunately, Afghanistan's presence in events and engagements of ECO has been hampered for the last two years. Our commitment to supporting socioeconomic development in Afghanistan is unwavering and intact within the framework of **ECO Advocacy Program for Afghanistan**.

Yet, we are obliged to provisionally pause the process in view of our international obligations, awaiting an enabling environment and also a global response to this end. At the same time, we encourage all our Member States to suggest/recommend new modus operandi in managing the current limbo situation concerning our general interaction with the country, as well as resumption of our activities based on ECO Advocacy Program for Afghanistan.

Excellencies,

The role of **ECO Specialized Agencies**, including Cultural Institute in Tehran, Educational Institute in Istanbul and Science Foundation in Islamabad is pivotal for the continued promotion of cultural, educational and scientific cooperation in the region. Regrettably, our Specialized Agencies have been experiencing severe funding issues due to lack of collective membership and ownership by member countries.

I sincerely encourage the remaining countries to join our Specialized Agencies. I believe a comprehensive membership of ECO Specialized Agencies by all our Member States will make them increasingly stronger and vibrant to help further facilitate ECO's multifarious goals.

I am also glad to recall the establishment of **ECO Trade and Development Bank** in 2005. This important institution was created as a financial arm of the Organization. However, due to certain impediments, the Bank has yet to be enabled to support our regional development efforts. To ensure the materialization of our expectations from the Bank, its mandate needs to be revised and consistent with ECO's project-based regional development approach, while the Member States who are not shareholders of ECO-TDB are required to consider and expedite their accession process in this regard.

Excellencies,

The developing landscape and the prospects of cooperation are rapidly changing in tandem with the ongoing and unprecedented global turmoil. This situation leaves no institutions, including ECO, immune to the recurrently varying international scenarios and growing competitiveness.

In this context, our Deputy Foreign Ministers had an interactive brainstorming session in May last year to consider major challenges and reform-related issues as well as prospects of cooperation in the ECO. Their interaction has been quite significant, making various useful recommendations to improve efficiency and effectiveness as well as relevancy of the ECO. Later, Member States agreed to form a **High-Level Committee** on Reforms and Prospects of Cooperation in the region. The Committee is expected to meet during first half of 2024 to mull over different issues of the Organization, ascertaining appropriate recommendations thereon, along with the consideration to renew and extend the implementation period of ECO Vision 2025.

Excellencies,

With deepest appreciation, we acknowledge the biennially renewed guidance of our leaders that refuels our cooperative journey. We stand firmly committed to fostering regional economic cooperation. We are confident that with the continued support of our leadership, ECO will keep moving towards more sustainability and advancement.

Yet to maintain the progressive momentum of the ECO with increased focus on our project-based regional development targets, we look forward to receiving continued support of our member countries, along with smooth and timely **payments of their budgetary contributions to the Organization.**

Concluding my remarks, I once again thank His Excellency President Shavkat Mirziyoyev for generous hospitality provided to the visiting delegations.

I also reiterate my gratitude to all our Heads of State/Government, as well as other distinguished delegates for their kind participation in this important Summit.

Thank you.