

**Statement by H.E. Mr. Khusrav Noziri,
Secretary General of the Economic Cooperation Organization
at the 4th ECO Ministerial Meeting on Tourism
*December 13, 2022 (virtual mode)***

**H.E. Mr. Aziz Abdulhakimov, Deputy Prime Minister and Minister
of Tourism and Cultural Heritage of the Republic of Uzbekistan,
Honorable Ministers/Heads of Delegation,
Distinguished Delegates,
Ladies and Gentlemen,**

It is a great privilege for me to welcome you all to the 4th ECO Ministerial Meeting on Tourism being kindly hosted and chaired by the Republic of Uzbekistan in virtual format. I would like to extend my deep gratitude to the Republic of Uzbekistan for their excellent chairmanship of the ECO in 2022 and support for convening this meeting.

Holding the current chairmanship of the ECO, H.E. Shavkat Mirziyoyev, honorable President of the Republic of Uzbekistan declared 2022 as the “Year of Strengthening Connectivity” in the ECO region. During the year, Uzbekistan has generously hosted several major events, including today’s important meeting.

The 26th Meeting of the Council of Foreign Ministers of the ECO Member States will be held in Tashkent on January 25, 2023 which is optimistically believed to yield more productive outcomes to lead the region towards further development and prosperity. I deeply thank the Government of Uzbekistan for their supportive role and valued contribution to help secure the ECO’s aims and objectives.

Excellencies,

Tourism sector is placed among one of the ECO’s most important areas of interest, prioritized for development under the ECO Vision 2025. The ECO region is well-known for its natural beauty, diversity of historical and cultural heritage, memories of the ancient Silk Road and home to 74 UNESCO registered World Heritage Sites.

It is quite exciting to note that tourism achievements of Uzbekistan - one of the important members of the Economic Cooperation Organisation appear to clutch the global acknowledgment. In 2023, the city of Samarkand will be in the center of world tourism industry which is very much encouraging, especially for our region. The 25th session of the General Assembly of the World Tourism Organization (UNWTO) will be held in Samarkand. This all is based on the result-oriented policy pursued by H.E. Shavkat Mirziyoyev, honorable President of Uzbekistan for the continued development of the country's tourism sector.

Such a high-level event in Uzbekistan will undoubtedly attract the attention of the world media, which will ultimately serve to promote the tourism potential of the ECO region and attract even more tourists to Central Asian countries.

Distinguished Delegates,

As you are aware, the 3rd ECO Ministerial Meeting on Tourism was held on October 3-4, 2019 in Khujand, Tajikistan which is also an important historical city in our region. The event declared Dushanbe as the ECO Tourism Capital for the years 2020-2021, whereas the cities of Sari and Ardabil in Iran have been declared as the ECO Tourism Capitals respectively for the 2022 and 2023.

Today, we stand ready for selection of the ECO Tourism Capital for the years 2024 and 2025. In this connection, I would like to request you to kindly support election of Shahrizabzand Erzurum - beautiful and historical cities of Uzbekistan and Turkiye, respectively, as the next ECO Tourism Capitals. I believe the process will facilitate development of touristic and economic capabilities of the selected capitals and fuel the spirit of solidarity for improvement of regional tourism sector.

Dear Participants,

During the last decade, international travelling to the ECO region exceeded 87 million people, holding 6% share of the total worldwide tourism arrivals in 2019. According to World Tourism and Travel Council, more than 10 million individuals were employed in travel and tourism industry in 2019 within ECO region, accounting for around 6.9% of total employment. Around 11% of total export of the region in

2019 is contributed by international tourism receipts. The intra-regional tourist flows amongst the ECO Member States accounted for more than 24 million with its total share standing at 27.5%.Uzbekistan has registered the most of the intra-regional tourism followed by Kyrgyzstan, Azerbaijan and Kazakhstan.

In 2019, the number of visits from non-ECO countries was more than 63 million, accounting for a total of 72.5%. Around 72% of international visits were realized from Europe. This indicates the popularity of ECO region for Europeans as a tourist destination.

Considering the region's potential and population, the ratio between tourist arrivals and total international tourism expenditures is still relatively modest and there is a need for increased regional cooperation to have the optimum use of all available resources to augment regional tourism.

Excellencies,

The regional tourism sector was one of the hardest hit industries by the Coronavirus pandemic. The estimations made by the ECO Secretariat indicate that the tourist arrivals to the region shrank by 73% in 2020 and the tourism receipts decreased by 67%. While the regional tourism experienced a mild upturn in 2021 with tourist arrivals increasing around 50% compared to 2020 when the global widespread use of vaccines boosted hopes for recovery though it was still below the 2019 levels.

Under their declarations in the Ashgabat Consensus for Action adopted by 15th ECO Summit in Turkmenistan, the ECO Heads of States/Governments assigned the Tourism Ministers of the Member States to take quick actions in line with the regional and global initiatives, aimed at coping with post-pandemic challenges that the regional tourism industry has met due to COVID-19.

As the ECO Member States continue to look forward to coming out of the yoke of the pandemic, improving the tourism potential of the region and discovering some fresh ways and means to attract tourists and most importantly promoting the intra-regional exchange of tourists, the 4th Ministerial Meeting on Tourism provides an excellent stage to

lead for enhancing cooperation and creating synergies among the tourism authorities of the Member States, as well as renewing their commitment on their mutual tourism objectives.

Moreover, today's event is expected to adopt a 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 among the Member States. This is to ensure steady recovery and progress in regional tourism.

Distinguished Delegates,

ECO Vision 2025 adopted by 13th ECO Summit in 2017 at Islamabad specified the tourism industry as the priority development field for the ensuing decade. To achieve the envisaged targets as laid down in our strategic document and the implementation framework, the Member States are required to apply common and systemic approach and take concerted actions. I would like to bring to your kind attention some of the key areas and major constraints that need to be addressed jointly to achieve the expected outcomes in regional tourism sector.

First and foremost, accessibility of the ECO region is the primary requirement for promoting tourism within and outside the region. Development of ECO tourism industry needs intra-regional and inter-regional connectivity, exploiting every mode of transportation in order to ensure comfortable, cheaper and safe travelling.

Secondly, a coordinated and joint action is imperative by all ECO Member States to embark on mutual tourism programme providing a more attractive, competitive and powerful product image as a tourism destination and a strong institutional boost to highlight the attractiveness and variety of the tourism experience in the ECO Region. This promotional and marketing programme may also offer a platform for intensified cooperation of both public and private sectors in the ECO Member States either on individual or collective basis.

Thirdly, cumbersome and time-consuming border-crossing and visa procedures are a serious deterrent to the development of tourism sector in the region. Simplification of border crossing procedures for foreign tourists, convenient and liberalized visa regimes as well as automation of entry requirements are some possible interventions to

address any such problems that our tourism industry continues to experience. It requires close coordination and commitment by Member States to develop the required regulations in a minimum time frame.

Fourth, development and implementation of harmonized service quality and environmental standards aligned with international best practices, including those related to health and safety, are essential to raising the competitiveness and portraying the region as a global tourism destination. This will be effective for attracting more international tourists towards the ECO Region.

Another equally important regional phenomenon that requires attention is diversification of tourism into various niches. Diversifying products, services and market in the tourism sector is essential to avoid dependence on a single activity or market. Most tourism facilities in the region are focused on the spring and summer months with good potential for year-round activities; these businesses therefore require investments in capacity and quality to reduce their seasonality and improve private sector profitability in tourism businesses. Based on its capacity, the ECO region can diversify tourist segments and experiences, into various tourism subdivisions to help address seasonality and provide year-round opportunities for businesses in the region.

Excellencies,

You would kindly agree that while governments make policies and plans for development of tourism in terms of national economic objectives and priorities, a large economic activity under tourism in many countries is extensively carried out by their private sectors. Encouraging increased participation of and enhanced cooperation with the private sector and local communities will bear prospects of achieving maximum efficiency and gaining on our regional tourism objectives.

In 2022, the Organization held the First Forum of the ECO Heads of Tourism Associations, Unions and other Tourism Stakeholders in virtual format. As an efficient outcome of this meeting, we set up the ECO Tour Operator Network uniting 242 tour operators and tourism agencies from Azerbaijan, Iran, Pakistan, Tajikistan, Türkiye, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan. The Network held its first meeting recently, and now it is actively working on development of the ECO

Tourism Packages. Taking this opportunity, we encourage other Member States to join the Network to make it further extensive and integrated.

I am also excited to announce that on the occasion of 30th Anniversary of ECO Enlargement and 4th ECO Ministerial Meeting on Tourism, the Secretariat is releasing a Special Chronicle titled “Tourism in ECO Region”. This exclusive edition which highlights tourism potential of the ECO Member States and showcases popular tourism destinations, attractions and other tourism related information will be soon sent to the Member States.

Distinguished delegates,

In conclusion, I would like to once again thank the Government of the Republic of Uzbekistan and His Excellency Mr. Aziz Abdulhakimov for excellent arrangements of the meeting, as well extend my deep gratitude and appreciation to all the honourable Ministers and the Heads of Delegations for their valued participation in the event.

We are quite confident that the outcomes of this meeting will lead us towards further productivity for development of tourism sector, providing a comprehensive regional roadmap for more cooperative and coordinated activities in the area.

Thank you for kind attention.