

**Statement by H.E. Mr. Ilham Aliyev, President of the Republic of Azerbaijan,
at the 12th ECO Summit Meeting
(Baku – Azerbaijan, 16th October, 2012)**

**Dear ladies and gentlemen!
Distinguished heads of delegations!
Dear guests and friends!**

I warmly welcome all of you to Azerbaijan. Welcome to Azerbaijan!

Thank you for having elected me chairman of the summit. I want to assure you that Azerbaijan, as a country presiding over the ECO, will do everything possible to further develop the organization, enable it to work on specific projects, so that the friendly and brotherly relations between member-countries are further widened. I want to take this opportunity to express our gratitude to the Republic of Turkey, which chaired the organization for the past two years, and its leadership for their successful activities.

Our summit is held on the eve of a very important date. In November 1992, the ECO was joined by seven new members.

Azerbaijan was one of them. We can say that a new period in the organization's activity began from that time. For its part, Azerbaijan has always attached great importance to the ECO, and we believe that successful activity of ECO is in the interests of all member-countries because we share a common history, economic and political interests.

As far as common history is concerned, I can say that our peoples have lived and worked together for centuries, have always supported each other. I think that the formation of our organization on this legacy is a remarkable fact. We are united by traditions, religion – the sacred religion of Islam, and we are committed to make efforts to promote Islamic culture. In 2009, Baku was declared the “Capital of Islamic Culture” and we successfully completed that glorious mission. In 2018, another ancient city of Azerbaijan, Nakhchivan, will be the “Capital of Islamic Culture”. It is a sign of great trust and respect of the Islamic world. We, in turn, make effort to strengthen Islamic solidarity in the world. We are very concerned about the growing trend of Islamophobia in some countries, we are rightly outraged by the insult of Islamic sanctities. We, in turn, should introduce Islam more widely as a religion of peace, brotherhood and charity. I believe that this should be one of the activities of our organization.

Political relations between member-countries are also at a high level. We support each other in international organizations.

Last year, Azerbaijan was elected a member of the UN Security Council with the active participation and support of member-countries. I take this opportunity to thank all the

fraternal countries that supported us, I express our gratitude to you.

Azerbaijan, too, participates in all international activities to protect the national interests of ECO member-states. Mutual support and understanding will certainly strengthen our organization.

At the same time, we appreciate the position of the member-states on our most painful problem – the Armenian-Azerbaijani Nagorno-Karabakh conflict. This position is part of the documents to be discussed today. As you know, the territorial integrity of our country recognized by the international community has been violated for many years. Armenia has perpetrated a military aggression against Azerbaijan. As a result of this aggression, 20 per cent of our land is under Armenian occupation, more than a million Azerbaijanis are refugees and IDPs in their native homeland. A policy of ethnic cleansing was carried out against us. In 1992, the Armenians committed the Khojaly genocide, killing hundreds of innocent people, including women, children and the elderly. Three countries have already recognized the Khojaly genocide as an act of genocide. One of them is our brotherly country and a member of ECO – Pakistan, and I want to take this opportunity to thank the people of Pakistan and its leadership for this fair position. Azerbaijan's territorial integrity has not been and cannot be a subject of negotiations.

The UN Security Council has adopted four resolutions on the conflict settlement, providing for an unconditional withdrawal of Armenian forces from the occupied lands. Unfortunately, these resolutions are not fulfilled. But we are sure that Azerbaijan will restore its territorial integrity and sovereignty, and all our fellow compatriots affected by the occupation will return to their homes, their ancestral lands.

I want to take this opportunity to thank all the member-countries who have supported our fair position again. Of course, this occupation and injustice have inflicted a major blow to our economy. Despite that, the Azerbaijani economy has been on an upward trend in recent years. Over the last eight to nine years, our gross domestic product grew three times, industrial production has also increased almost threefold – i.e. by 300 per cent. Great progress has been made in poverty reduction.

Over the years, poverty has dropped from 49 to 7 per cent, unemployment is 5.3 per cent, our foreign debt accounts for only 7 per cent of the gross domestic product. International rating agencies have upgraded the credit ratings of Azerbaijan.

Although the financial and economic crisis in Europe is still ongoing, the leading rating agencies have raised the credit ratings of Azerbaijan. In terms of competitiveness, Azerbaijan is in one of the decent places in the world. Our reforms allow us to diversify our economy, so that all sectors of the economy develop and people live better.

Our trade with ECO member-countries is growing. It is very gratifying. In 2011, our trade increased by 38 per cent and in nine months of 2012 by a further 20 per cent. This shows that we have very effective economic relations with member-countries.

This is natural because our political relations are at a very high level, and the economic sector, of course, should match this level. I am sure that the outcomes of this summit and the decisions made will give an even greater impetus to our trade. We will support each other economically, through economic factors even more.

Two years ago, during the ECO summit in Istanbul, Azerbaijan gave the word and made a commitment that it would become a shareholder, a member of the ECO Bank. I can say with a sense of satisfaction that this is already a reality. Azerbaijan is already a shareholder of the ECO Bank and intends to actively participate in major infrastructure and economic projects in member countries. Both through the bank and as an investor. Azerbaijan has now started to invest abroad. This investment stands at billions of dollars. We are conducting research to access new markets.

Of course, we primarily invest in countries that are friendly and brotherly for us. I think that as part of the summit, as a result of joint future work of the delegations and economy ministers, we can hold a wider debate on the scope and volume of mutual investment. We are in favor of that.

Azerbaijan is also implementing very important regional infrastructure projects. Of course, these first include energy infrastructure projects. In recent years we have initiated the creation of a diversified network of oil and gas pipelines. Our energy is now supplied to world markets in different directions. I am very glad that these initiatives meet the interests of the region and that regional countries support them. Our activity in the energy sector, of course, secures our national interests, enhances energy security and creates new opportunities in this area.

I believe that our initiatives and activities in the transport sector serve our common interests. Azerbaijan takes practical measures to facilitate the operation of the North-South and East-West transit corridors. Our geographical location is such that Azerbaijan can become a regional transport hub. We have invested in newly emerging seaports, improvement of railways, roads, air transport. This, of course, is an excellent opportunity to turn Azerbaijan into a transport center. The Baku-Tbilisi-Kars railway, the construction of which is scheduled for completion in the near future, will serve all ECO member-states because it will link not only Azerbaijan with Turkey. In essence, this road links continents, and if we look at the map of ECO member-states, the map of our organization, we will see that this road will be very effective and important for all of us. It is a strategic project, a project that will significantly improve the geopolitical and geo-economic situation. I am very pleased that this project will be realized in the near future.

In short, dear guests, I would like to repeat that Azerbaijan attaches great importance to ECO activities. Thus far, the ECO activities have been very successful. This organization has secured a worthy place in the world. The large economic potential of member-countries makes us even stronger. I am sure that our work on specific projects at the next stage will further strengthen our organization, and our initiatives in the field of economics, politics and culture will only enhance mutual trust.

I cordially greet all of you in Azerbaijan. I am sure that the Baku Summit of ECO will be successful and its results will further strengthen the organization.
