

**WELCOME STATEMENT OF
H.E. DR. ANWAR UL-HAQ AHADY,
MINISTER OF COMMERCE AND INDUSTRIES OF THE ISLAMIC
REPUBLIC OF AFGHANISTAN
AT THE
FOURTH MEETING OF THE ECONOMIC COOPERATION
ORGANIZATION ON COMMERCE AND FOREIGN TRADE
Kabul, Afghanistan
July 11-13, 2011**

In the name of God, the most merciful and most compassionate

Respected Secretary General of ECO,
Esteemed Ministers of ECO Member States,
Heads of Delegations,
Dear Colleagues and Friends,

I would like to extend my warm welcome to all of you at this fourth Ministerial Meeting of the Economic Cooperation Organization (ECO).

I thank you for your participation in this meeting. Yesterday the brother of the President of the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan was assassinated. We are still in mourning. This sad event has affected the schedule for our meeting. The heads of delegations were supposed to meet with the President yesterday afternoon and the President wanted to address this 4th ECO Ministerial Conference. Unfortunately both items of our schedule were cancelled. Despite our mourning, I hope you will have a pleasant stay in Kabul.

Ladies and Gentlemen, I am sure you will agree with me that we have gathered here today to build upon the solid foundation for sustained regional socio-economic growth defined during the last two decades within the framework of ECO. We are here to elaborate and agree on the strategic directions for the next decade for broader and deeper economic integration within ECO, to bring prosperity and stability to our region and create economic opportunities for the citizens of our nations.

The achievements of ECO over the last decade have been remarkable. The ECO Trade Agreement (ECOTA), the ECO Agreement on Promotion and Protection of Investment; the Agreement on Establishment and Operation of ECO Smuggling and Customs Offences Data Bank; the Visa Simplification Agreement; and the ECO Trade and Development Bank are all indicative of the desire of ECO Member States to increase cooperation and improve the conditions for sustained regional development.

I urge all ECO members to join each and every one of these initiatives, and to actively and enthusiastically fulfill their respective commitments. We do complement each other in many ways, as ECO members combined are blessed with rich economic resources, including natural resources, competitive and skilled labor, vast agricultural land, and significant industrial capacity. In other words, our cooperation within the ECO framework presents each of us a win-win situation for improving standards of living, increasing prosperity, and reducing poverty within ECO Member states.

There are tremendous opportunities for trade and investment and cooperation in the form of joint ventures among economic agents in the private sector of ECO member states. We should facilitate these possibilities and create an environment that is conducive to increasing productivity and competitiveness by lowering the costs of trading and doing business, modernizing transit infrastructure, harmonizing trade rules and customs procedures, and launching new initiatives for standards harmonization and mutual recognition of product certificates.

This round is not any different from previous successful ones, thanks to our diligent senior officials and the ECO Secretariat staff who have been working closely during the recent years and enduring very long hours during the recent days to make this Ministerial meeting a great success.

Indeed, they had a very busy agenda. They deliberated over dozens of vital areas and made significant strides toward increasing economic cooperation and promoting and facilitating trade and transit among our nations. I am happy to be informed, and I am pleased to inform you, that the Senior Officials Meetings have reached substantive and meaningful conclusions on critical issues of great significance to our regional development and cooperation.

The most important accomplishment of this meeting is the agreement among senior officials to recommend that ECOTA implementation begin by the end of 2011. It is also recommended that all Member States expeditiously ratify the ECOTA agreement with its annexes. They have also agreed to form a joint working group to prepare a draft of a roadmap on multidimensional trade and development strategy. The same group will also prepare a preliminary study of prospects of establishing a free trade area among Member States.

The Senior Officials have also agreed to form another joint working group to develop a draft trade facilitation agreement aiming at simplification of customs procedures, harmonizing transit trade mechanism and adoption of transparent custom regulatory regime. They have also agreed to have a regional agreement on organizing joint trade promotional activities and the Republic of Turkey has accepted to prepare the draft of the agreement.

The ECO Trade Development Bank is an important ECO Financial Institution; I am pleased to inform you that Afghanistan will probably sign the documents to join the Bank today. And I hope all other Member States will join this important institution. Of course, other issues were also discussed during the last two day meetings of the senior officials. You can follow a more comprehensive discussion of the issues I mentioned and other issues in the Ministerial Meeting Report.

Ladies and Gentlemen:

We all agree upon the need to move toward an open, transparent, predictable and non-discriminatory trade, investment, and transit framework. Our actions and practices, however, should be consistent with our ambition. I would like to stress the importance of our properly and effectively implementing existing arrangements, and refraining from adoption of any arbitrary measures that are contradictory to our current agreements or that hinder trade and transit. We need not take practical measures that

would worsen the current framework governing our trade relations and transit rules, but rather, we need to take concrete steps to improve them and show good will.

I urge all Member states to remain consistent with our common long-term visions. In that context, I would like to stress the importance of considering the WTO principles and rules as the broad umbrella when defining our trade relations. Seven ECO Member states are seeking WTO accession while three are already members. There are certainly many ways in which acceding countries can learn from the experience of those which are WTO members.

Similarly, we should seek to maximize utilization of modern customs procedures of the World Customs Organization, particularly the Kyoto Convention procedures, to facilitate trade. Reducing trading costs and delays will provide our consumers greater options at competitive prices and reduce the production costs of our producers so they can become more competitive in global markets.

Finally, we all have challenges to meet. For some, these may be more difficult. I urge ECO members to keep in sight the development needs and resources of ECO LDC members and guarantee transit access for the landlocked countries in accordance with the ECOTA provisions, which call for adequate transit facilities and expeditious transit.

We are all encouraged by and grateful for the hard and productive work of our senior officials as well as the private sector in deliberating critical issues during the last 2 days.

I am confident that we are on the right path; the path that will allow each of our nations to maximize exploitation of its comparative advantages for the benefit of the citizens of our nations.

I reaffirm Afghanistan's commitment to ECO and its objectives of greater intra-regional cooperation, trade, and investment to improve socio-economic conditions in the ECO region.

I am looking forward for a productive meeting today, and once again I wish you a pleasant stay in Kabul. I hope that you are able to find time to experience our traditional Afghan hospitality.