



**Statement by
Ambassador Halil Ibrahim AKCA
ECO Secretary General**

**At the Opening Session of the
26th Meeting of ECO Regional Planning Council**

**13 December 2015
ECO Secretariat- Tehran**

Your Excellency Dr. Abbas Aragh'chi
Honorable Deputy Minister of Foreign Affairs of the Islamic Republic of Iran;
Honorable Heads of Delegation;
Dear Participants;
Ladies and Gentlemen;

At the outset and on behalf of my colleagues in the ECO Secretariat and on my own behalf, allow me to welcome you all to the 26th Meeting of ECO Regional Planning Council (RPC). Since this is the first RPC Meeting I am attending as the ECO Secretary General, I would like to take this opportunity to pay tribute to all my fellow predecessors, the former ECO Secretaries General, for their leadership and contributions into the last 25 RPC meetings. RPC is the most technical body within ECO where main activities of the Organization in the following year are being developed by the Member States.

This RPC Meeting is held at an important stage since ECO is engaged in the process of evolving its new vision for next ten years. The "ECO Vision 2025" should set priorities of the Organization in the light of regional emerging needs and realities as well as the trending global agenda, including the post 2015 development agenda and Sustainable Development Goals (SDG's), recently adopted in the United Nations. The Vision, supposed to be adopted during the upcoming ECO Summit/COM in Islamabad, will be built on the direct contributions by the Member States at different levels and in various ECO forums. This 26th RPC Meeting is a timely contribution into the Vision process. The annual ECO work programme to be developed by this RPC Meeting can also be guiding towards the direction Member States wish to see their Organization move ahead in the future. To take most advantage of having delegations from the planning and technical bodies of the Member States here in Tehran, we have also planned to organize a brainstorming session on the sidelines of the RPC Meeting aimed at getting more concrete contributions into the Vision setting process.

Distinguished Participants;

Since last RPC Meeting in March this year, we, the Secretariat and the Membership along with the ECO regional institutions and affiliated bodies, have made efforts to realize the objectives of the work programme, through some activities and events. Let me brief you about the current state of affairs within ECO which will give you an update about where we stand now in different areas and sectors of activities.

Intra-regional trade promotion and facilitation have always been a top priority in ECO which, if realized, will result in sustained economic growth; job creation and retention; innovation, productivity and competitiveness; upgraded living standards; and poverty reduction in the individual Member States and the Region as a whole.

According to the International Trade Centre (ITC), in 2014 the cumulative world trade of the ten ECO Member States reached US\$ 811 billion. This included exports of US\$

376 billion and imports of US\$ 435 billion. According to the same ITC sources the intra-ECO exports and imports stood at US\$ 32.411 billion and US\$ 33.924 billion respectively, making the total intra-regional trade US\$ 66.335 billion in 2014. It is heartening to share that the intra-regional trade witnessed an increase from 5.5% in 2005 to about 8.1 percent in 2014, yet far below its potential.

While focusing on regional forces to lift up intra-regional trade value and volume, we cannot afford to be oblivious to the developments taking place around us. The agreement on Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP) has been concluded amongst the countries which represent nearly 60 percent of global GDP and 50 percent of international trade. This will cause trade diversion from non-TPP countries and hence should be a cause of concern for us. This calls for deepening and broadening the trade linkages between Member States and putting ECOTA on the fast track. Therefore, there is an urgent need for the ECOTA Contracting Parties to complete procedural requirements for ECOTA implementation, and for non-ECOTA countries to join the Agreement.

There are also other unfinished trade-enforcing processes within ECO which need further actions. ECO Reinsurance Company (ECO-RC), established with an authorized capital of US\$ 30 million, is still not operational. It has been ratified just by two out of three signatory Member States. ECO Agreement on Promotion and Protection of Investment (APPI), a uniform policy for attracting and protecting investment in the ECO Region and a driver for the flow of investment and transfer of technology into the Region, needs at least three more Member States, in addition to Iran, to ratify APPI and its Amendment Protocol.

There have also been important trade-related developments in the Region since last RPC Meeting where Kazakhstan formally joined World Trade Organization (WTO) and Afghanistan completed its accession negotiations and will soon become a full WTO member. I congratulate these two ECO Member States for their great achievements.

Intra-regional trade boost in the ECO Region continues to rely also on an important role to be played by business community. ECO Chamber of Commerce and Industry (ECO-CCI) is still instrumental in creating and consolidating Business-to-Business (B2B) linkages in the ECO Region. The forthcoming ECO-CCI General Assembly and Executive Committee Meeting in Ankara as well as the ECO Business Forum in Baku and Trade Fairs in Tehran are timely opportunity for ECO to see new momentum in its private sector to further contribute into ECO trade profile.

With its expansion to 6 Members, ECO Trade and Development Bank (ECOTDB) is now more conducive for trade facilitation and promotion in the ECO Region. Notwithstanding its nature as a multilateral development bank, ECO-TDB has always been requested to expand its operations into trade domain. Let me seize this opportunity to congratulate the new ECO-TDB President, Mr. Javaid Aslam on his appointment and wish him a successful tenure.

There are also other promising activities in ECO with direct or indirect bearing on regional trade. The ECO Stock and Commodity Exchanges will soon meet in Tehran to explore potential regional cooperation. We hope that this initiative prove its value for the Region. The ECO-UNIDO Trade Capacity Building Project is now in its third phase aiming

at formulation of regional and national quality policies. The Project will constitute a major step towards elimination of non tariff barriers in the Region and shoring up export competitiveness of Member States.

Distinguished Delegates;

Transport and connectivity within the Region has witnessed further progress. The ECO/IDB Feasibility Study on Customs Related Provisions of TTFA has been recently commenced by recruitment of a qualified international expert recommended by World Customs Organization (WCO) and nominations of national consultants by the Member States. We will also pursue the significant goal of providing a Program of Action on modernization of the Member States cross-border Customs points to serve a more efficient and less costly transit transport.

Following collaboration among all stakeholders, I am also pleased to inform that Pakistan has successfully acceded to the TIR Convention as one of the most effective international instruments for facilitation of transit transport. As a result, all the ECO Member States are currently contracting parties to the TIR instrument in line with provisions of the TTFA and consequently in a better position for transit transport improvement and facilitation in the Region. Republic of Azerbaijan has also acceded to the Convention concerning International Carriage by Rail (COTIF) and International Green Card System.

Concrete measures are also ongoing by ECO in collaboration with the partners to design and organize capacity building programmes addressing the needs of the Member States. As regard the capacity building programmes, various national and regional workshops were held during 2015 including the ECO/IRU National Capacity Building Workshops on CMR, ADR and TIR Convention for Afghan officials (Kabul, August 2015), ECO/IRU National TIR Workshop in Pakistan (November 2015) and Regional Workshop on ADR, Modernization of Border Crossing Points and Digital Tachograph System (Ankara, 10 November 2015).

The 7th Meeting of TTCC and its Committees including 12th Meeting of the Heads of ECO Railway Authorities, 4th Meeting of Customs Transit Committee, and 7th Meeting of Road Committee were held in 2015 which considered and decided on the related measures for implementation of provisions of TTFA. Moreover, the Member States finally agreed on ToRs of KTAI and ITI Road Corridors as a result of which the Secretariat will be in a position to commence the process for conducting the required feasibility studies for these two important road corridors through recruitment of national and international consultants. The revised ECO road and railway transit routes maps were also approved in the Meetings and published by the Secretariat among the Member States and international organizations.

The Feasibility Study to “identify the needs for development of infrastructure connectivity and services in the ECO Member States” has achieved successful progress. The technical assistance of the International Telecommunication Union (ITU) has been obtained and a qualified expert has been assigned to serve as the international consultant

for the Study. So far, the Questionnaire prepared by the international consultant has been circulated among the Member States and the country inputs are underway. It is hoped that the results of the Study would be beneficial for the Region.

**Excellencies;
Dear Participants;**

Energy continued to be high priority area for regional cooperation within ECO. The ECO Plan of Action for Energy/Petroleum Cooperation (2011-2015), which covers energy trade, coal, energy efficiency and conservation, renewable energy, and energy policy and planning, expires by the end of this year and as per mandate by the 25th RPC Meeting, the Secretariat has prepared an Evaluation Report on the Implementation of the Plan of Action for the consideration of the Member States. The 4th ECO Ministerial Meeting on Energy will soon discuss areas of enhanced regional cooperation on energy in post 2015 and decide on possible revision or extension of the plan of Action.

Renewable energy sources are getting momentum and will be organizing the first ECO Ministerial Meeting on Renewable Energy on the sidelines of the next International Renewable Energy Agency (IRENA) Assembly in January 2016 in Abu Dhabi.

The initiative of establishment of the "ECO Regional Electricity Market" is still ongoing and the pilot phase continues to move ahead with the participation of Iran and Turkey.

In environment, we continued to expand ECO outreach since last RPC. ECO Secretariat was granted observer status in the United Nations Convention on Combating Desertification. This is an important development for ECO Region which is affected by the land degradation and sand storms. We also convened a regional workshop, jointly organized with the United Nations Forum on Forest, where experts from the ECO Member States were trained on how to develop bankable projects for financing sustainable forest management. Another important environment initiative was the very recent ECO Coordinating Meeting on the sidelines of the 21st Conference of the UN Climate Change Convention in Paris where our senior officials discussed areas of cooperation in post Paris era.

Agriculture, industry and tourism were also part of the work programme approved by the 25th RPC Meeting. The "ECO Seeds Agreement" was considered and drafted by experts from Member States with the contribution by FAO. The Draft awaits further views by the Member States. The ECO Regional Programme for Food Security (ECO-RPFS), continued with its implementation process. The Regional Coordination Center for the Project (ECO-RCC) will brief this RPC meeting on progress made in Project.

The ECO Plan of Action on Industry is still in place awaiting new momentum for actions. The 4th ECO Ministerial Meeting on Industry which is expected to generate this momentum is still pending. ECO Regional Institute for Standardization, Conformity Assessment, Accreditation and Metrology (RISCAM) is yet to be operational. ECO

Secretariat has recently followed up the issue with the concerned ECO Member States with a view to embarking on some activities in line with the approved roadmap for provisional implementation of the RISCAM.

The untapped potential for regional cooperation in tourism sector continued to be followed since last RPC. The Secretariat recently began to explore possible contacts with UN World Tourism Organization to utilize its expertise for development of regional tourism strategy and also to enhance ECO's role in the international tourism forums.

Distinguished Delegates;

Following 25th RPC meeting, ECO organized a high-level meeting on the sidelines of the United Nations Conference on Disaster Risk Reduction in Sendai, Japan where the enhanced regional cooperation on addressing disasters was emphasized. Ever since, ECO Secretariat has explored all possibilities for preparing necessary grounds for an ECO regional approach/strategy on disaster risk reduction. In a very last development, ECO Secretariat was invited by UNESCO and UN-Habitat to join a project on hazard mapping for main cities of four ECO Member States, namely, Afghanistan, Iran, Pakistan and Turkmenistan. We are also in contact with UNISDR for possible partnership for implementation of the Sendai Framework in the ECO Region.

Since last RPC Meeting, the regional cooperation for combating drugs and organized crime has witnessed a renewed interest of the Member States. The draft Statute of ECOPOL was almost finalized by the experts from the Member States. Attorneys General of the Member States in their recent meeting decided to enhance judicial and legal cooperation to fight against transnational organized crime with particular focus on cyber crime and human trafficking.

The Secretariat has also initiated preparation of a roster list of the experts and training facilities available within the ECO Region for capacity building and training of the officials on issues related to drugs and organized crime.

**Excellencies;
Ladies and Gentlemen;**

Let me conclude my statement by reiterating the importance of your meeting this week for the Organization and its approach towards future. I would like once again welcome you all and wish you a pleasant stay in Tehran. Let me also express my appreciation for excellent preparatory work done by my colleagues in the Secretariat. I wish you success during your deliberations.

I thank you!
