

**Statement by H.E. Dr. Shamil Aleskerov, ECO Secretary General
at the 20th Meeting of the Council of Ministers
(Baku – 15th October, 2012)**

**His Excellency,
Mr. Elmar Mammadyarov, Foreign Minister of the Republic of Azerbaijan
Honourable Ministers, Heads of Delegations**

Excellencies

It is a matter of great privilege for me to address the 20th Council of Ministers meeting. At the very outset, I would like to felicitate the Honourable Minister of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Azerbaijan, Mr. Elmar Mammadyarov, on his assumption of the Chairmanship of the Council of Ministers. I am confident that under his illustrious guidance, ECO will continue to march towards achieving its cherished goals.

I wish also to express my sincere gratitude to the Republic of Turkey for their tremendous contribution to the advancement and accomplishment of our Agenda during their Chairmanship and extend my heartfelt congratulations to H.E Dr. Ahmet Davutoğlu the Foreign Minister of the Republic of Turkey.

I would also like to express my thanks to the Government of the Republic of Azerbaijan for the excellent arrangements and the warm hospitality extended to all the delegates since their arrival in Baku.

It is my distinct honour to present to this august forum a brief account of the activities and progress of the Economic Cooperation Organization achieved over the past two years.

Excellencies,

Reduction of tariffs and removal of non-tariff barriers as envisaged in the ECO Trade Agreement (ECOTA) remains the key to economic integration of the ECO region. I am pleased to state that the Contracting Parties to ECOTA have agreed to start trade liberalization under the Agreement with effect from 1st January 2013. Since trade is a powerful instrument of economic growth, trade liberalization in our region will open up new avenues of growth and development. I would urge the remaining ECO countries to please join the Agreement so that we can register concrete progress in achieving the goals outlined in the ECO Vision 2015.

In addition to implementing ECOTA and broadening its membership base, there is also the need to support the accession of ECO's non-WTO member countries.

In fact, regional and multilateral trade liberalizations complement each other as countries well integrated regionally find it convenient to integrate multilaterally.

We appreciate the activities of ECO Trade and Development Bank as it continues to expand its operations including scope of products and services to meet the growing demand for finance. The completion of the process of membership by Afghanistan and Azerbaijan at an early date will constitute a concrete step towards enhancing the contribution of the Bank to promoting trade and development of the ECO region. The remaining ECO Member States are also requested to consider joining the Bank to give momentum to the efforts for growth and sustainable development in the region.

Excellencies,

Enhancing regional cooperation in transport is an essential driver of economic growth. A comprehensive ECO Railway Network Development Plan, incorporating about forty projects, has been approved and several regional rail infrastructure projects are already being followed up vigorously.

Concrete measures are afoot to streamline the freight service of the ECO Container Trains on Islamabad-Tehran-Istanbul and Istanbul-Almaty routes. Subsequent to the demonstration run of the Container Train on Bandar Abbas-Almaty route in October 2011, commercial run of this train is being launched.

In the road sector, progress has been registered in establishing Islamabad-Tehran-Istanbul and Kyrgyz Republic-Tajikistan-Afghanistan-Iran corridors. The ECO/IRU Project for Regular Monitoring of Trucks has been completed, while the ECO Road Network Development Plan is being finalized. Pilot projects are in progress to enhance the application of the TIR Convention along the approved corridors. In February 2012, two Afghan trucks crossed the border under that Convention for the first time.

The establishment of the ECO Logistic Provider Associations Federation is at the final stage. Steps are being taken to start the ECO system for online money order through postal services and the ECO White Card Insurance Scheme.

The ECO Ministers of Information and Communication Technology will soon meet in Tehran to set new horizons for regional cooperation in this important field. Working groups are also being convened for enhancing regional cooperation in Civil Aviation to improve connectivity in ECO.

Excellencies,

Cooperation in the energy sector is among the three top priority areas of ECO Plan of Action for Energy/Petroleum Cooperation (2011-2015) adopted by the 2nd ECO Ministerial Meeting on Energy/Petroleum held in Dushanbe in October

2010. According to the Plan of Action, the ECO countries are to actively pursue cooperation for the full utilization of their energy/petroleum potential. Several meetings, workshops and training courses have already been held under the Plan.

The ECO Region has huge reserves of minerals. In order to exchange information, technology and expertise for efficient use of region's mineral resources, the ECO Secretariat since 2011 has conducted two important regional events, namely the 4th ECO Minerals Experts Group Meeting and the 1st Meeting of ECO Heads of Surveying and Mapping Organizations.

The 4th ECO Ministerial Meeting on Environment and Meeting on Trans-Boundary Movement of Biological Specimens and Species were held in Tehran in June, 2011 and March, 2012 respectively. The Ministerial Meeting adopted the Framework Plan of Action on Environmental Cooperation and Global Warming (2011-2015) and the Project Profile for implementation of the Plan. The Meeting on Trans-Boundary Movement of Biological Specimens and Species designated ECO Institute of Environment Science and Technology (ECO-IEST) as the body to establish a network among the Member States for Trans-boundary protected areas.

Excellencies,

The Regional Coordination Centre on the Implementation of the ECO Regional Programme for Food Security (RPFS) will soon be established in Ankara, the Republic of Turkey, with the support of Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO). ECO and FAO jointly are also preparing a Technical Assistance and Capacity Building Proposal to seek financial assistance from the Global Agriculture and Food Security Programme (GAFSP) of the World Bank.

The ECO/FAO Project on Seed Sector Development in the region has been signed by the Republic of Turkey and Kyrgyz Republic. Another Member State may sign the project for its early implementation. The establishment of ECO Regional Centre for Efficient Use of Water in Pakistan, the ECO Regional Centre for Risk Management of Natural Disaster (ECO-RCRM) and the ECO Agricultural Biotechnology Network in Iran as well as the ECO Permanent Veterinary Commission (ECO-VECO) is in process.

The Republic of Turkey will organize the 5th Ministerial Meeting and the 4th Senior Officials Meeting (SOM) on Agriculture on November 13-16, 2012 in Antalya. We also appreciate the readiness of the Republic of Turkey to host the 2nd Donors' Conference on the implementation of the ECO Regional Programme for Food Security during the current year.

Progresses was registered for cooperation in the areas of SME development, Privatization and private sector development, Standardization, Technology

Transfer, and Nanotechnology, which could be highlighted with commencing of Interim Coordination Unit at the Secretariat to pave the way for operationalization of ECO Regional Institute for Standardization, Conformity Assessment, Accreditation and Metrology (RISCAM).

In Tourism, two ministerial and several Experts meetings have done a lot to expand the regional cooperation for greater exchange of tourists among the Member States. The First ECO Tourist Guidebook has been published and ECO Tourism Promotion Fund has been approved to support the related projects.

Excellencies,

Increasing ECO Cooperation for achieving Human Development and Millennium Development Goals remained one of our priorities in 2011 and 2012. The 1st Meeting of the ECO Ministers/Heads of the Human Resource Development Responsible Organizations will be held on 12-13 November 2012 in Tehran. The meeting will focus on the priority sustainable human development issues.

The cooperation in the field of health related Millennium Development Goals and working on establishing ECO Blood Safety Network and Drug (Pharmaceutical) Regulatory Network are among our ongoing priority projects. The Republic of Kazakhstan will host the 2nd ECO Health Ministerial Meeting in 2013, which will deliberate on the issues relating to the quality of life and health care in the region.

We are implementing a joint regional strategy on combating drugs, terrorism and trans-national organized crime, approved by our Interior Ministers. The implementation of the European Union-funded project on Fight against Trafficking from/to Afghanistan into other ECO Member States is progressing well. We are also in the process of establishing ECOPOL for coordination against transnational crime.

Statistics and economic research is the key to informed decision making. Accordingly, ECOSTAT is harmonizing regional statistical indicators and developing the relevant metadata methodology for timely dissemination of data and information among Member States.

Excellencies,

The reconstruction in Afghanistan is indispensable to peace, stability and development of the region and we have been paying special attention to it in our regional programmes and activities. An Afghan Reconstruction Fund established to facilitate rebuilding efforts in the country is financing four construction projects. A protocol has also been signed between ECO and Turkish International Cooperation Agency (TIKA) to enhance cooperation in joint projects from the ECO Reconstruction Fund. I would like to express my gratitude to Azerbaijan,

Iran, Pakistan and Turkey for their contributions and to call upon other Member States to make similar contributions to the Fund.

It is a matter of great satisfaction for ECO that finally, after an inordinate delay of more than a decade, the two core specialized agencies, namely ECO Science Foundation in Islamabad and ECO Educational Institute in Ankara became operational in December, 2011 and April, 2012 respectively.

Excellencies,

ECO Parliamentary Forum has been established and its 1st Meeting was held on September 4-5, 2012 in Islamabad, Pakistan. The charter of the Parliamentary Assembly of ECO Countries drafted by the Meeting and finalized by the CPR has been placed on the agenda of the current COM for approval.

External relations of ECO have witnessed significant progress as efforts continued to consolidate and expand close cooperative relations with the UN system and other regional and international organizations. A new Memorandum of Understanding was inked with the Developing-8 Organization in October, 2011.

Cooperation with UNESCAP has also witnessed further growth. In line with the recommendation of the Comprehensive Plan of Action for Enhancing ECO's External Relations, the Contact Groups in Vienna, Rome and New York have been activated.

At the end, I assure Your Excellencies, that with your support and guidance, ECO will move closer to realizing its ideals. We have to sustain this process to make ECO an outstanding reference in regional cooperation.

Before I conclude, I would like to once again thank the Government of the Republic of Azerbaijan for their excellent hospitality. I am also indebted to Honourable Ministers and Heads of Delegations from the Member States for their presence.

Thank you.
