

Welcome Statement by the ECO Secretary General
The 17th Meeting of the ECO Council of Ministers
(Herat, Afghanistan)

No. 17th COM/2007

Your Excellency
President Hamid Karzai,
President of the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan,
Honourable Ministers and Heads of delegations,
Distinguished Ambassadors and representatives
of regional and international organizations,
Ladies and gentlemen,

It is a great honour for me to extend a very warm welcome to you in this inaugural session of the 17th Meeting of the ECO Council of Ministers. I am grateful to the Honourable President of Afghanistan, His Excellency President Hamid Karzai, for his kindness to grace this occasion. I thank the Government and the people of Afghanistan, in particular, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Afghanistan and the people of Herat, for hosting this meeting and for the elaborate arrangements to make it a memorable event. It is indeed an added pleasure to be having this meeting in Herat. The cultural and historic significance of this beautiful city and its geographic centrality to the ECO region make it a natural host to a meeting of regional significance.

Excellency,

The Council of Ministers is the highest decision-making body of ECO. It holds its 17th annual meeting today. It would review the activities that the organization pursued during the past one year. It would consider and approve fresh plans to carry forward our collective aims and objectives. We do this every year. Yet this meeting has a special significance; it marks the start of a distinct new stage in ECO's march forward. ECO has nearly completed the institutional arrangement that it needs to achieve its goals. We have signed important agreements in diverse fields. These include trade and transport, energy and environment, industry and agriculture, banking and finance, to mention only a few. Our effort henceforth will be to sharpen our focus on implementing these agreements.

Your Excellency,

We have a vast potential, as indeed an urgent need, to promote cooperation among our member states. ECO's intra-regional trade is worth over \$ 26 billion and it represents a mere 7 percent of our total trade. We have to create a free trade area in this region by 2015 and must set our sails towards this goal in all seriousness. We have already achieved an important milestone in the ECOTDB. It has been set up in Istanbul with a capital of 300 million SDRs, and will become operational before the 1st of December this year. We are on course to further

improve and extend the operations of the ECO Container and Passenger trains. We have already managed to reduce the travel time of the container train by 36 hours – starting from Istanbul and passing through Tehran, Ashgabat, Tashkent and Almaty. We have agreed to introduce shortly a white insurance card for the ECO countries. We are pursuing power trade and power management. ECO is also contributing, albeit in a modest way, to the reconstruction of Afghanistan.

Excellencies,

ECO's performance is looking up. We have to sustain it. Implementation of our annual calendar of events has risen sharply from 46 percent each in 2004 and 2005 to 74 percent in 2006 and is set to touch 80 percent this year. We have taken credible steps to establish important new institutions. The ECO Centre for Management of Natural Disasters was set up in Mashhad last month. We hope to put in place, during the next few months, the ECO Reinsurance Company and the ECO Science Foundation. Close cooperative relations with our regional peers and international organizations are being pursued. We have agreed to sign, during the next two months, MoUs with SCO and CICA.

Honourable President,

Afghanistan is a key member of the ECO family of nations. It is a land-bridge between our Central Asian members and the rest of the ECO states. Afghanistan's active role on the regional and international planes, under Your Excellency's wise leadership, is reflective of the inner confidence of this nation. With such a resilient country assuming the Chairmanship of the Council of Ministers for the coming year, ECO is sure to pick new pace, attain higher heights and achieve its cherished goals.

I thank you, Sir.