

**Inaugural Statement by H.E. Mr. M. Mahdi AKHOUNDZADEH, Deputy
Minister of Foreign Affairs of the Islamic Republic of Iran,
at the 23rd Meeting of the Regional Planning Council
(6-8 May, 2013 – ECO Secretariat)**

In the Name of God, the Compassionate, the Merciful

**Distinguished Heads of Delegation,
Honorable Secretary General,
Distinguished authorities of the Islamic Republic of Iran,
Dear Participants, Ladies and Gentlemen,**

This is indeed an honor to address the 23rd Meeting of the ECO Regional Planning Council. At the outset, I would like to extend, on behalf of the Islamic Republic of Iran, a warm welcome to the distinguished delegates of the ECO member states and wish them all a pleasant stay in Tehran. I should also extend my words of thanks to H.E. Mr. Shamil Aleskerov, the distinguished ECO Secretary General and his staff in the Secretariat for their contributions to our Organization in general and to this meeting in particular.

Let me continue by recalling the unparalleled role of the Regional Planning Council in the Economic Cooperation Organization. As the most accumulative technical body of the Organization, RPC presents an annual opportunity for the ECO membership to transform a critical mass of expertise and knowledge into a series of programmes and plans to be implemented in the year to come. We remain hopeful that this Council's meeting serves its purpose in generating a promising, workable and target-oriented annual programme for the Organization.

**Excellencies,
Distinguished Participants,**

Regional integration still constitutes a valid solution for collective development. Even globalization and multilateralism in the world economy have not undervalued the imperative of regional arrangements, like ECO, for economic development of the countries and regions. ECO Region enjoys vast potential for comprehensive regional development. It enjoys all required elements for success, including but not limited to, a big and complementary market, exquisite geographical location, globally-known transit capacities, abundant energy resources, and rich and knowledgeable human capital. Two decades of experience also presents a solid basis for a successful kick-off towards the optimal realization of the objectives enshrined in the Izmir Treaty.

I recall that in the last RPC meeting, I shared with the membership our understanding as to what were needed to be addressed in order to make ECO keep pace with the requirements of a successful regional arrangement. I

enumerated some shortcomings which had slowed down the rate of progress in our Organization. First and foremost, I referred to the need for restoration of strong **solidarity** among ECO membership. I am very happy to acknowledge that since last time we met here, there has been promising developments indicating stronger sense of ownership within our Organization. Wider participation in this RPC meeting as well as some other ECO activities in the past 12 months, including the expansion of the ECO Bank's membership to the Republic of Azerbaijan, allude to this promising development. This will undoubtedly enhance the **visibility** of the Organization, as the second shortcoming. We are still suffering from lack of sufficient visibility of ECO within and outside the Region. Addressing this shortcoming requires concrete measures at different levels and layers of the Organization. RPC, as the ECO central planning body shall play a pivotal role in this respect. Moreover, a welcome development in this regard is before us, namely the relevant recommendations by Eminent Person Group (EPG) which await actions by the membership. We remain hopeful that the EPG process and processes as such would culminate in higher visibility of the Organization.

In addition, enhanced visibility of the Organization also requires further attempts to raise public awareness about ECO and its profile at the national, regional and global levels. I seize this opportunity to propose to the Honorable Secretary General to embark on, as a priority, a process of "ECO Public Diplomacy" with an ultimate goal of ensuring the "visibility" our Organization deserves.

The **feasibility** of the decisions and programmes and the **viability** of our Organization as a whole are still matters of concern which deserve careful attention by the ECO family, both membership and the Secretariat machinery. Planning exercise in the Organization, particularly those done through RPC should ensure feasibility of the decisions and projects. It goes without saying that this requires that all proposed programmes and projects should be pre-assessed against the feasibility benchmarks.

All in all, and having above mentioned shortcomings been addressed properly, we can be hopeful that ECO would survive potential challenges ahead.

**Excellencies,
Ladies and Gentlemen,**

Let me turn to some important developments in the universe of ECO since 22nd RPC meeting. ECO convened its 12th Summit in October 2012 in Baku. Our Heads of State and Government managed to recapitulate the policies and practices of the Organization since their 11th Summit with a view to giving policy advices to the operational bodies of the Organization. In a preceding event in Baku, ECO Council of Ministers met at its 20th meeting where political endorsement was given to technical earlier decisions and some guidelines were approved for the later observation by the Organization.

Another development which deserves to be noted here is the successful attempt by ECO membership to give birth to a long-awaited undertaking within our Organization. Parliamentary Assembly of ECO (PAECO) convened its first meeting in Islamabad and began to pave the way for a parliamentary back-up for ECO activities.

There have been also some developments as regards regional cooperation in several sectors. The 1st ECO Ministerial Meeting on Information and Communication Technologies, the 5th ECO Ministerial Meeting on Agriculture, the 3rd ECO Ministerial Meeting on Energy/Petroleum and the first Meeting of ECO Heads of Tax Administrations managed to make concrete decisions on the possible enhanced cooperation among member states.

In trade domain, the very recent meeting of the ECOTA Cooperation Council seemed to have been able to make some tangible progress towards early implementation of the Agreement. Transport sector continued to experience positive moves as ECO development plan for railway connections was approved and the one for road connectivity was rehearsed.

Against these backdrops, RPC Review Committees which begin their work as of this afternoon will have extensive working materials for drafting a feasible annual work programme for our Organization. The Committees have also before them the "General Guidelines" we adopted at 21st RPC meeting in 2011. As you may recall, the main purposes of the "Guidelines" are to make ECO annual programme project-based rather than a meeting-based one and to consolidate the overlapping activities/institutions. The "Guidelines" proved its credibility as outcomes of the last two RPC meetings showed. We expect the Review Committees to consider these "Guidelines" seriously as they prepare the final documents of this RPC meeting.

**Excellencies,
Dear Participants,**

In conclusion, let me once again welcome you all and wish you a successful RPC meeting.

I thank you
