



ECONOMIC COOPERATION ORGANIZATION

The Secretary General's Statement

for the

20th Meeting of Regional Planning Council
(Antalya – 16th to 18th February, 2010)

The ECO Secretariat, Tehran

**Statement of H.E. ECO Secretary General
to the 20th ECO Regional Planning Council Meeting
Antalya, 16-18 February 2010**

**Honorable Minister, H.E. Dr. Cevdet YILMAZ,
Excellencies,
Distinguished Delegates,
Ladies and Gentlemen,**

It is a distinct honour for me to welcome you all to the 20th session of the Regional Planning Council (RPC) of the Economic Cooperation Organization. I would like to thank H.E. **Dr. Cevdet YILMAZ** Honorable Minister for his kindness to grace this occasion. I also extend a very welcome to our brothers from the Turkish Cypriot State. Availing myself of this opportunity I would like to express my profound gratitude and sincere appreciation to the Government of the Republic of Turkey for hosting the event and making excellent arrangements for it. Allow me to say that hospitality is a cornerstone of Turkish culture. This time we are experiencing it in this beautiful city of Antalya.

We are proud to be in Turkey- the country recognized as an emerging role model in regional economic modernization. As a natural bridge between East and West, it opens doors to a shared future for ECO countries.

Excellencies,

The RPC meeting is an important annual event which provides us an opportunity to review our past progress and to chalk out our future course of action for realization of our collective goals and objectives.

Excellencies

Trade tops the agenda of the ECO activities. It is vital for sustained socio-economic development of our region. It holds the key to regional economic integration. During the past year, we have been able to gain more ground and make new progress in this sector. To create conducive environment for trade in the region, legal frameworks have been put in place. To date, Agreements on Market Access, Investment, Customs Offences Data-Bank, Visa Simplification and Administrative Assistance in Customs Matters have been signed and ratified by most of the ECO member states. Last week, we had the signing ceremony for the Articles of Agreement for the Establishment of ECO Reinsurance Company. This is another landmark achievement which would contribute towards enhancing commercial cooperation.

Implementation of ECO trade agreement (ECOTA) has always been ECO's priority in the area of trade. Its implementation is strongly needed to remain competitive vis-a-vis regional groupings. It was earlier agreed that the tariff concessions will be offered from January 2009. However, non-submission of lists by some of the contracting parties has delayed implementation of tariff concessions as envisaged under the agreement. We earnestly request these countries to expedite provision of lists to benefit from the increased market access. In this context we have already positive signals that the requisite lists would soon be conveyed. I deem it important to mention that the 10th ECO Summit urged the Member States

to initiate negotiations on ECO Free Trade Agreement within one year of the implementation of ECOTA.

Regional trade is being effectively facilitated by ECO Trade and Development Bank. The Bank has successfully commenced its operations and has started offering lending facilities for trade sector and for the Small and Medium Enterprises (SMEs).

Distinguished Delegates,

Development of efficient Transport and communication sector is pivotal for economic integration. In fact progress on this front holds the promise of accelerated socio-economic development in the region. In view of the potential of cooperation in this area, it has always been high on our Agenda. ECO activities for the past period shows that nearly half of all ECO events planned for 2009 have been organized in transport sector. With the active support of our member states, we have achieved tangible results. In August 2009, we were able to see the test run of ECO Container Train from Islamabad through Tehran to Istanbul. This year we hope that similar trains will be launched from Almaty to Bandar Abbas and from Urumchi (China) to Istanbul. Construction of the rail road from Uzen to Gorgan will connect Kazakhstan, Turkmenistan and Iran. Currently, we are also exploring the possibility of linking Herat in Afghanistan to Kashgar in China. We have planned to launch ECO Truck Caravan to enable continuous transport flow from Turkey, and Pakistan to Central Asia traversing the territories of Iran and Afghanistan. The Caravan will cross the Caspian Sea through territories of Azerbaijan and Iran to reach its destination in Turkey.

We have been able to successfully complete the Multi Modal Transport & Trade Facilitation Project. As a part of it, we had a new videoconferencing system installed at Secretariat. It will curtail travel costs by nearly 30 percent. Early this year, the Secretariat will start equipping ECO Units located at Transport Ministries of Member States with similar facilities to enable virtual interaction.

Excellencies

Turkey, Iran and Pakistan, with the support of the IDB, have joined hands to achieve a set of objectives, namely, (i) improvement of the Sarakh Station in Iran, (ii) rehabilitation of the Quetta-Taftan Railroad in Pakistan, and (iii) installation of a missing link in Van Lake area in Turkey. Our special thanks are to IDB for the US \$412,000 support for the implementation of the TTFA. In the same respect, IDB is assisting ECO in developing the Master Plan of Transport and Communications for the ECO region. Similarly, United Nations Economic Commission for Europe (UNECE) and International Road Transport Union (IRU) are helping to align the positions of ECO Member States on international conventions/agreements on transport. In support of the common effort in defining clear boundaries of regional corridors, the blue prints of road and railway transit route-maps have been provided to relevant authorities. It is our hope that member states would provide their views and comments at the earliest possible. Visa unification process has been successfully completed. A single visa sticker is being developed for the use of transit drivers.

Good will initiatives of member states are for the common good. In this respect, allotment of land in Chabahar by the Islamic Republic of Iran for using as a Free Zone is commendable. This unique opportunity ushers our land-locked countries into internal sea

markets. Likewise, if Turkey and Pakistan could initiate similar support to LLCs, it would widen the market niche of ECO as a region.

Excellencies,

Agriculture has a significant share in GDP of our countries. It employs nearly 40 percent of the economically active population. We continue with our efforts to enhance agricultural cooperation among our membership especially under the framework of the ECO Regional Programme for Food Security (RPFS) prepared with the technical assistance of FAO. In this context, it is encouraging to see that there is a steady increase in the production of some agricultural crops in the ECO region.

In the industrial sector, we have several challenges in front of us such as enhancing productivity and competitiveness, infrastructure development, promotion of export of industrial products. We need to intensify our cooperation on standardization, privatization, nanotechnology and introduce some training programmes for Small and Medium Enterprises (SMEs).

In the field of Tourism, our cooperation has recently gained momentum. The 2nd ECO Ministerial Meeting on Tourism was held in Antalya in October 2009 where we finalized the modalities for ECO Tourism Promotion Fund and considered the draft ECO Tourist Guide Book and adopted several important decisions. The English version of the ECO Tourist Guide Book would soon be published and circulated to the Member States. We also plan to publish the Russian version of the Guide-Book. This important achievement is being pursued in cooperation with the ECO Cultural Institute for which we are grateful to ECI.

Excellencies,

The energy sector needs our special attention. We have to accelerate our cooperation in this area to fully utilize the potential for the benefit of the region. Our Plan of Action on Energy and Petroleum Cooperation in ECO region would expire soon. The 2nd Meeting of the ECO Energy Ministers likely to be convened later this year in Dushanbe, Tajikistan, would deliberate on the extension of this Plan of Action. We look forward to active participation of all the member states in the event.

To enhance cooperation in the field of Minerals, we have been able to successfully establish a Database on Geosciences and compile a Mineral's Distribution Map.

On environment, we are actively engaged in collecting National Environment Reports of Member States. The outcome of this activity will be considered at the upcoming 4th Ministerial Meeting scheduled later this year in Iran for which we would encourage participation of Member States. Ecotourism has become an entirely distinct activity of the Organization. Azerbaijan, a Coordinating Country for this sector, is preparing to host the Ecotourism Conference in June this year. The Conference will work out a framework to assess the expected benefits of ecotourism for the region.

Distinguished Delegates,

Establishment of a natural link between statistics and information technology of regional scope has been initiated. Data display design and technical profile of ECO Statistical Network (ECOSTAT) has been presented to Secretariat on 17 January this year. Member States will be able to access ECOSTAT later in the year upon on-site training of staff of

NSOs. Commendable effort in materializing this initiative was exerted by the Statistical Center of the Islamic Republic of Iran. The proposal came at a right moment and received full support of all member states.

The 19th RPC instructed the Secretariat to develop effective mechanism to monitor project implementation. To this effect, in December 2009, a Project Monitoring Group (PMG) has been set up to enable inter-agency coordination, monitor projects through entire cycle, and evaluate projects at completion. ECO decision making bodies will now receive regular progress reports. The Secretariat has foreseen training on built-in project control system. With UNDP assistance, the first training phase has been scheduled for end February this year. Member States will receive specific training on project monitoring system in the year ahead.

Economic research helps to develop economic policies applicable to ECO region in the short, medium, and long term. To promote development views of academia across the region, ECO Economic Journal was initiated in 2009. Commendable is the contribution of scholars from Turkey, Kazakhstan, Pakistan and Iran in compiling the first issue. Submission of articles, abstracts, and analytical reviews by member states for the subsequent issue will be appreciated. To prepare an updated economic strategy for ECO region, the Secretariat is organizing the 1st Meeting of its Leading Research Institutions. Participation of Member States in the formulation of a single strategy document would be welcome.

During the past years, Regional cooperation in the filed of health has restored within the organization. Considering the impact of this sector on the ultimate higher standard of life for all people in the region and considering the valuable experiences and capabilities available at the region, there is much to share with each other in this field. Similarly cooperation on different areas under health is initiated, inter alia, on health related Millennium Development Goals, Blood Transfusion and Pharmaceuticals.

Excellencies,

May I reiterate that health merits increased attention. It has become more demanding in a way it never was before. The programmes we have already initiated, and the projects we shall take up in the years ahead must have the full backing of the member states, should have the generous support of the donor agencies. These backing and support will guarantee the success and effective implementation of the health programmes and cooperation in the ECO region.

In the area of prevention of illicit drug trafficking, ECO is in the process of implementing a joint project in collaboration with the European Commission. Also in collaboration with the Colombo-Plan Secretariat, we are planning to jointly organize a training workshop in the near future.

Excellencies,

We need to enhance regional cooperation in the area of natural disaster management as a vital issue. We must develop effective programmes and projects for preparedness, mitigation and also for immediate response, emergency relief and rehabilitation. The

Secretariat is coordinating with relevant international organization to seek their support and technical assistance. It would be worthy to mention that in cooperation with other international/regional organization, OECD has proposed to cooperate on a new Project on Earthquake Safety for Schools in ECO region.

In the field of external relations, ECO is continuously endeavoring to strengthen its cooperation with international organizations, regional peers, and relevant non ECO Countries in a spirit of mutual benefit. In 2009, we have adopted our Comprehensive Plan of Action for enhancement of ECO's external relations. In line with the recommendations of the Plan of Action we will continue with our efforts to make our partnerships more meaningful and useful for the realization of our goals and objectives. We are determined to profile ECO as a dynamic, efficient and effective regional organization both at the regional as well as international level.

Excellencies,

In conclusion, let me say that in today's globalized world regionalism is gaining more significance. The regional approach offers collective solutions to collective challenges that transcend the boundaries of a single nation. It is a matter of great pride for us that among many regional organizations, ECO has established itself as a successful model of regional cooperation; a prominent body that has a capacity to effectively contribute towards the socio-economic development of the region. People of our region have high hopes from ECO. The agenda and activities of the organization hold the promise for a prosperous future for them. To meet their expectations, we need to make available more resources-both financial and human to inject fresh dynamism into the organization. It is unfortunate that some of the Member States are behind hand in fulfilling their financial obligations. I take this opportunity to request the concerned Member States to kindly settle their outstanding arrears at the earliest enabling the Secretariat to perform its functions in a smooth manner.

Excellencies,

The deliberations during the next two days would determine our momentum for the current year. We must be ambitious yet practical in our approach. I would like to draw your attention to our proposed Calendar of Events for the current year. From previous experience, it can be observed that some decisions of our meetings remained un-implemented and commitments remained unfulfilled. I would, therefore, sincerely request the Member States who have not yet confirmed date and venue for the events offered to be hosted by them, to kindly do so during this meeting to help us plan the activities for the current year in a better way.

I would like to say that we have the potential and we have the will to work together for the realization of our common goals and objectives. There is a need to work with sharper focus, renewed commitment and greater vigor.

In the end, I wish you all successful deliberations.

Thank you.