Annex – III

The 19th Meeting of ECO Regional Planning Council (RPC)
(Tehran, 12-14 January 2009)

The Secretary General's Statement

Your Excellency
Mr. Manuchehr Mottaki,
Foreign Minister of the
Islamic Republic of Iran,
Excellencies,
Ladies and gentlemen,

It is a great privilege for me to extend a warm welcome to you in this 19th meeting of the Regional Planning Council. I thank, most sincerely, the Government of the Islamic Republic of Iran for hosting this important event. I am grateful to the Honourable Foreign Minister for his kindness to grace this occasion. He is ever so gracious to ECO, joining many of our events and guiding many of our activities. His presence is appreciable all the more because he is one of the most active Foreign Ministers and, to borrow an expression from Shakespeare, all the world is his stage. I also thank the distinguished delegates from the ECO member states for their presence and participation. We have with us this morning our brothers from the Turkish Cypriot State. I extend a warm welcome to them and thank them for joining us. The presence of our friends and partners from UN and international agencies is a source of added pleasure for us. I welcome you all most warmly.

Excellencies,

The Regional Planning Council meets early every year to review the performance of the year past and to chart its course for the year to come. This meeting is, however, no routine affair. Its timing is significant. We are barely a few weeks away from the 10th ECO Summit. Our top leaders will converge on this capital almost at the same time as spring will descend on Iran's lovely orchards. Today's RPC is also significant because of the current situation in the region and beyond, because of the new challenges that face us and the new opportunities that await us. We have to sharpen our focus on some areas. We have to reorder our priorities in others. New opportunities must not pass us by. We have to put them to the region's best advantage. All this will make the stuff of our deliberations in this RPC.

Excellencies,

The year 2008 was a busier year for the ECO. It brought us more activities and blessed us with better results. We held 54 meetings as against 44 in 2007 and 40 in 2006. This marked an increase of some 22 percent over last year, and 35 percent over 2006. Also, more member states participated in ECO meetings, and at higher levels. Six of our meetings were Ministerial – one every two months, on average. We achieved more of our objectives. We got within reach of several others.

In trade, which is our top priority, we turned the corner with the ECO Trade Agreement taking effect. One crucial step is though yet to be taken. It is the exchange of lists of trade items. We have to expedite it, and, to do so, we must transcend narrow, short-term gains. We have to aim for collective, long-term interests. We have our sails set towards a free-trade area by 2015. It is no easy target. But we are capable of achieving it. Already, we have created important landmarks on that road. The ECO Trade and Development Bank has become operational. The ECO Reinsurance Company is in final stages of being established. A set of useful agreements has been signed on investment promotion, customs cooperation and visa facilitation.

The private sector is being encouraged. More of its potential is being tapped. The ECO-CCI has been revitalized. A string of Trade Fairs, Buyers-Sellers' meetings and Business Forums was organized last year. Lately, a set of new initiatives has been taken for trade facilitation, capacity-building and bridging the information gap. We are setting up new forums for Women Entrepreneurs, Young Businessmen and Heads of Trade Promotion Organizations. The latter will have their first meeting in Tehran next week.

Excellencies,

The global financial crisis has sent disturbing ripples all across the world. Our region is no exception. The skewed policies of the rich and mighty are having to be paid for by poorer nations. Indeed, the poorest pay the most. The world was never as unfair, was never so unequal. We have to face it jointly. We have to evolve appropriate strategies. The 3rd ECO Finance Ministers' Meeting (Tehran, December 2008) decided to set up a Working Group to study the issue and draw up a set of recommendations. We will pick the thread in this RPC.

Excellencies,

Transport is the centre-piece of regional cooperation. It has to be high on our agenda. We are pursuing it through the Transit Transport Framework Agreement. We have set up a transit transport fund. We also propose to set up a Transport Infrastructure Fund. It would finance regionally important projects. The 3rd phase of the multimodal transport project is under implementation. It is assisted by UNCTAD and IDB. The ECO Motor Vehicle Insurance (White Card) scheme has taken effect. The travel time of the ECO container train, reduced to nine days from eleven last year, is being further reduced to seven days. China has joined us in transport and assured us of its full cooperation on the container train. We are pursuing its extension to Afghanistan, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan. Also, as decided by the 7th Ministerial Meeting on Transport (Antalya, April 2008), we are organizing this year a demonstration train on Islamabad-Tehran-Istanbul route.

Excellencies,

Agriculture contributes 20.7 percent to regional GDP. It employs 40.4 percent of our economically active population. We have a lot to catch up on in this area. The ECO Regional Programme for Food Security, prepared in cooperation with FAO, is

under implementation. It has two main components – increasing food production and facilitating food trade. It complements national initiatives. Funding has been arranged for national projects in Afghanistan, Iran and Turkey. Projects in Azerbaijan, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and Pakistan are under consideration. The 4th Ministerial Meeting on Agriculture (Baku, September 2008) approved the establishment of the ECO Seed Association in Turkey and a Water Management Centre in Pakistan. A Permanent Veterinary Commission in Iran is in advanced stages and should be in place shortly. We will pursue these and related activities to fruition this year.

Excellencies,

Industry contributes some 27 percent to ECO's regional GDP. Its real potential is certainly far higher. We have to initiate viable joint projects, create an investment-friendly environment and encourage the private sector. The 3rd Ministerial Meeting on Industry (Lahore, November 2006) marked a milestone in that direction. It agreed a Regional Strategy. It approved a Plan of Action each for setting up a Technology Transfer Centre, for SME Development and Industrial Property Rights. A Nano-Technology Network is being set up in Iran. Kazakhstan's proposal about an ECO Centre for Science and New Technologies is under consideration.

Excellencies,

In the energy sector, we need to promote power trade, power exchange and efficient use of renewable sources of energy. Frankly, we have done little in this field. The feasibility study on interconnection of power systems of the member states did not go far enough. Non-supply of data by some member states was the main obstacle. We have to review the whole subject and see how best to break this deadlock. We shall do so at the Energy Ministers' Meeting in Tajikistan shortly.

Another area that needs special attention is environment. We have to combat environmental degradation, promote awareness, harmonize environmental standards and develop a credible legal framework. We held a few useful workshops on biodiversity, ecological tourism and watershed rehabilitation. Such efforts should continue and must involve all member states. We would review this area and consider new initiatives at the Ministerial Meeting on Environment due in Islamabad this year.

Excellencies,

The campaign against drugs is an ongoing battle. We have to keep close watch on it. The Second ECO Interior Ministers' Meeting (Ashgabat, May 2008) approved an Action Plan on Drug Control and a Joint Regional Strategy on Combating Drugs, Terrorism and Trans-national Crimes. We need, and have enlisted, the support of international agencies, in particular UNODC, IOM and the European Commission. The latter has offered Euros 9.5 million for ECO's counter narcotics programme. With the IOM, we have agreed to sign an MOU, covering human smuggling and migration management.

The ECO region is a disaster-prone part of the world. Promoting a culture of Disaster Management and Safety is our priority. We have set up the ECO Regional Centre for Risk Management of Natural Disasters in Mashhad. A set of seminars and workshops was organized in cooperation with UNISDR, UNOCHA and WHO last year. The 3rd ECO International Conference on Disaster Risk Management was held in Tehran, October 2008. We have to keep the tempo. We have proposed a range of more activities for this year.

In conclusion, Excellencies, our region and our individual member states have many strengths. Our economic indicators betoken bright prospects. We are on course to see them realized. We must though accelerate our pace, maintain our focus. We have to plan ambitious, yet realistic, activities for the coming year. The calendar of events should cover all areas, with due emphasis on our priorities. We should pursue them with commitment – a commitment that should reflect in our active participation in every decision, in all meetings and at the right level. Also, as the 17th COM (Herat, October 2007) decided, every member state must host at least two meetings every year.

More important, Excellencies, is the implementation of decisions. Meetings remain bare and barren unless their decisions are followed-up and implemented. The Secretariat shall spare no effort to that end. I am confident that the member states will be fully cooperative. Together, we can, and shall, make a difference. The coming year and the years to follow must be more productive. Our cooperation must be more fruitful and our efforts more successful. This is what progress is all about. A better and brighter tomorrow for the whole region, for all our people.

I thank you, Sir.