

The 16th RPC Meeting

Statement of H.E. Mr. Askhat Orazbay, Secretary General of ECO Secretariat

(Tehran, January 30 - February 02, 2006)

Annex-III

*Your Excellency, Dr. Ali Reza Tahmasebi,
Minister of Industries and Mines,
Excellencies,
Distinguished Delegates,
Ladies and Gentlemen,*

Allow me to extend to you a very warm welcome to the ECO Secretariat this morning. I am particularly grateful to H.E. Dr. Tahmasebi, for being able to be with us despite his busy schedule. I also thank him for the thought provoking inaugural speech that he has just delivered. I am confident that it will provide a useful direction for our deliberations in the coming days. I would also like to express our gratitude for the support and cooperation that we have received from the Government of the Islamic Republic of Iran, particularly the Ministry of Foreign Affairs.

I would also like to thank the distinguished delegates particularly those who have come all the way from their respective countries to enrich our discussions. Their presence here demonstrates the commitment of their governments to the goals and objectives of ECO. Our thanks also go to the Missions of the Member States in Tehran for contributing to the comfortable stay of their delegations.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

As you are aware, the Regional Planning Council (RPC) is regarded as the planning arm of the Council of Ministers and is accordingly entrusted with the task of discussing and recommending the future activities of ECO. In so doing, the RPC deems it necessary to review the past programmes of the Organization and evaluate their successes as well as shortcomings. It also proposes new programmes of action in line with the objectives of the Organization as laid down in the Treaty of Izmir as well as policy guidelines and directives. It is due to the importance of this forum that the Eminent Persons Group (EPG), which was established at the recommendation of 13th Council of Ministers (COM), in its report that was endorsed by the 15th COM, recommended that the Member States should participate in the RPC meetings at the highest level to enhance the effectiveness of this organ.

This session of RPC assumes special significance as the seven Review Committees will also be taking into account the ECO Vision 2015 adopted by our honourable Foreign Ministers during the 15th COM. The ECO Vision sets new targets in priority and non-priority areas for the Organization to be achieved by the year 2015.

This session is also taking place soon after the reorganization of the Secretariat as approved by the 15th COM. This includes merger of the Project Research and Economic Research & Statistics Directorates and the creation of a new Directorate of Human Resources & Sustainable Development. This Session is also significant as this year will witness a large turn over of members of the Directing Staff of the Secretariat as a sizable number of them, including myself, will be completing their tour of duty here and will be replaced by a new team. I wish the new team all the best.

Since we last met in this very hall in February last year, there has been significant progress in all the areas. However, I will confine my statement to some of the most important achievements that have taken place in the last one year. However, the details of our successes as well as setbacks have been reflected in my report which has already been circulated and will be discussed under item No. 5 of the agenda.

Since February 2005, two sectoral Ministerial Meetings have been held in addition to the 15th session of the Council of Ministers. These include the 3rd Ministerial Meeting on Commerce/Foreign Trade and the 2nd Ministerial Meeting on Industry. I am happy to report that out of 74 events that were approved for the year 2005 by the 15th RPC, 46 percent of them have been implemented. However, if we consider the fact that out of 74 events, 45 events had exact date and venue, the rate of implementation of the calendar of events for 2005 jumps up to 76 percent.

In trade and investment sector, our collective endeavors are to lay down the necessary regulatory framework for investment opportunities and take measures towards progressive removal of trade barriers within the ECO region and expand intra and inter-regional trade and investment trends. To this end, implementation of ECO Trade and Investment agreements such as ECOTA, Agreement on Promotion and Protection of Investment (APPI), and relevant trade and investment facilitation programmes offer collective hopes for spurring prosperity and sustainable development in the region. We need to realize that since 2003, only Pakistan and Tajikistan have ratified the ECOTA and our urgent priority option is to establish a time framed action plan for other signatory ECO countries to ratify this Agreement and non-signatory ECO countries to become a Party to it at the earliest.

To address this policy, in collaboration with the coordinating member state (Pakistan) for early implementation of ECOTA and compilation of its annexes we will tailor appropriate actions/programmes to fulfill Member States' participation requirements and realization of ECOTA no later than 2006 and pave the way for free-trade plan of ECO as envisaged in the ECO vision 2015. On the other hand, a new formulation for Principles of our Fast Track Approach policy to ECOTA is under consideration of the respective countries. In the meantime, for the APPI, which envisages common policy and common action for attracting investment in the ECO region, we are requesting other member states to become a Party to it as soon as possible.

It is a gratifying that we are about to realize the establishment of ECO Trade & Development Bank and ECO Reinsurance Company as both the projects are part of each other and enjoy the same significance in the promotion of trade and investment. The process of introducing Governors/Directors has now been completed and the first meeting of the Board of Governors will be held in the Republic of Turkey soon in order to finalize various steps for the establishment and date of operation of the Bank. I hope that these two major projects of ECO would prove to be prosperous institutions to finance and assure full-size regional projects of mutual benefit, for overall regional economic development.

Distinguished delegates,

The implementation of the long awaited Transit Transport Framework Agreement (TTFA) which was signed in 1998 seems to be in sight as the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan has formally conveyed the ratification of the agreement recently. Thus, in terms of Article 43 of the Agreement, TTFA will come into force in May 2006. We are also hopeful that the Islamic Republic of Iran and the Republic of Turkey will also ratify this important Agreement at an early date as was pointed out by their distinguished delegates during the last RPC meeting. With the designation of Republic of Azerbaijan as the coordinating country for TTFA and also with the formation of the Transit Transport Coordination Council (TTCC), the Member States will be able to take a major step forward in the regional integration and the landlocked Member States in particular will be in a position to benefit from the facilities of transit transport offered in this Agreement. I would take this opportunity to request those member states that have not yet signed or ratified TTFA to do so at an early date.

The year 2005 turned out to be a very productive year with regard to the implementation of the Plan of Action for ECO's participation in the reconstruction of Afghanistan which was approved by the 13th COM meeting. A project concerning Construction of Deh Mazang Public Park and maintenance of Kabul Zoo was selected to be financed from the Special Fund for the Construction of Afghanistan, a feasibility study on the rehabilitation of Nawar Bridge in Nangarhar Province assigned to ECO-CEC was completed and a seminar on the reconstruction of Afghanistan was also held in Kabul in November 2005. The Islamic Republic of Iran announced a pledge of nearly US dollars four hundred thousand for the Special Fund. I request other Member States to join Pakistan and Iran and announce their pledges for this Fund.

The 15th RPC meeting had requested the Secretariat to speed up the commencement of the feasibility study on the interconnection of ECO countries power systems. I wish to point out that considerable progress has been made in our activities for the implementation of this study. A Contract has been signed with the selected Consultant and the work on the study has commenced on August 25, 2005. We hope that the Member States will extend all possible cooperation to the Consultant to facilitate smooth and timely completion of the study.

We would also like to note with satisfaction the recent developments related to promotion of energy trade in our region. A Workshop on this subject was organised last July at the ECO Secretariat with the cooperation and financial assistance of the World Bank, which may be followed up by other activities in which the Member States would be interested, including an analytical study by the Bank. Similarly, the Secretariat in consultation with the Member States has started work on drafting the Plan of Action for Energy/Petroleum cooperation in the ECO region for a new 5 year period to be submitted for approval by the 2nd ECO Ministerial Meeting, expected to be convened in Tehran, during this year.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

We believe that the momentum which has been gained in cooperation on the Environment should be maintained. With active cooperation of the Member States, it will be possible to successfully implement the ECO Plan of Action for cooperation on Environment (2003-2007). The status of its implementation and other related issues were the subjects of consideration by the 3rd meeting of Working Group on Environment and ECO Expert Meeting on Environmental Impact Assessment, held in February and September 2005, in Islamabad and Ankara, respectively. I am happy to announce that the 3rd Ministerial Meeting on Environment will take place early this summer in Kazakhstan.

Agriculture has always been an important sector for ECO economies. Last year, FAO and ECO have finalized the ECO Regional Programme for Food Security (RPFS) which contains more than 10 regional and several national projects. There are about 60 million undernourished people in the ECO region with marked variations among the countries. Regional programme is expected to help alleviate food insecurity in the ECO region to a significant extent. Main pillars of the Programme are enhancement of domestic production through efficient use of natural resources, availability of high quality inputs and promotion of regional and international trade. Main task for us now is securing funding for the projects envisaged by the programme.

We have made initial contacts with the Islamic Development Bank. The Bank has very kindly expressed interest to finance four regional workshops and ten national projects; one each for each member country amounting to nearly US dollars 2.5 million. For completion of procedures, detailed national follow up is required on the part of our governments. This year, we intend to organize one donor conference in Turkey and one business forum in Dubai with the assistance of IDB and FAO for attracting donor /private sector interest to regional as well as national projects. Although, FAO and ECO are endeavoring to get funding for the projects, strong involvement and contributions of our governments seems indispensable for the success of the same.

FAO ECO Technical Cooperation Programme (TCP) for strengthening seed supply in the ECO region amounting to US dollars 350.000 is at final stages. The implementation is expected to start in early 2006.

In the field of Industry, we have organized several events including the 2nd Ministerial Meeting on Industry in November 2005 in Turkey. In the Meeting, Plan of Action on Privatization has been adopted by our ministers. The studies for the establishment of ECO Regional Institute for Standardization, Conformity Assessment, Accreditation and Metrology (RISCAM), ECO Technology Transfer Center (ETT Center), cooperation on SMEs, Industrial Property Rights and preparations for ECO Industrial Cooperation Strategy are progressing at a satisfactory level. The ECO Regional Strategy for Industrial Cooperation will be submitted to the forthcoming Ministerial Meeting on Industry in Pakistan.

The richness of cultural heritage and natural vista in the ECO region demands further intensification of cooperation efforts in the field of tourism. In this regard, we intend to expedite the publication of an ECO Tourist Guide in cooperation with ECO Cultural Institute.

It is quite encouraging that there is a growing realization within the Organization about the greater need for the human resource & sustainable development. Accordingly, as directed by the 15th COM, a new Directorate has been established in the Secretariat. The newly established Directorate will deal with issues such as Human Resource Development, Social Development, Drug Control activities, Health and Poverty Alleviation etc. I would, therefore, request the participating delegates to kindly guide this Secretariat about the tasks to be undertaken by this Directorate. According to the decision of 15th COM, the Drug Control & Coordination Unit has now been integrated into the formal organizational structure of the Secretariat and as a part of the newly established Directorate. Its budget has been included in the budget of the Secretariat which has been approved by CPR. Therefore, under the new arrangement, the Secretariat will hope to continue to receive the cooperation of the Member States in its efforts to fight the menace of drugs and in its endeavours to attract necessary technical and financial assistance from the international organizations and the potential donors.

ECO continues to cement its relations with other international and regional organizations with a view to benefit from their financial support and technical know how. We have recently signed an MoU with ASEAN. Similarly, we are also considering to sign an MoU with the Islamic Chamber of Commerce & Industry.

It is satisfying that our Specialized Agencies and the Regional Institutions continue to march towards the realization of their goals. It is also gratifying that as recommended by the 14th & 15th RPCs, the 15th COM formally admitted the ECO-Consultancy & Engineering Company (Pvt) Limited (ECO-CEC) as a "Regional Institution" of ECO. We hope that ECO-CEC will play a positive role in the development of our region.

Before I conclude, I would like to point out that the Eminent Persons Group (EPG), in its report had highlighted the need for the realistic preparation of annual calendar of events. This report was also endorsed by the 15th COM. I would, therefore, earnestly request the distinguished delegates that while finalizing the calendar of events, they may consider to approve only those events, which are realistic and very important for the progress of this Organization. The delegates may wish to give priority to those events for which there are willing hosts so that the Secretariat can avoid looking for volunteers during the course of the year.

May I once again thank you for being with us today. I hope that the delegates that have come from their respective countries will find their stay here enjoyable and that they will leave Tehran with happy memories.

Thank you.