

The 7th Ministerial Meeting on Transport & Communications The Secretary General's Statement

(Antalya-Turkey, 15-17 April, 2008)

**Your Excellency
Mr. Binali Yildirim,
Minister for Transport and Communications,
Government of the Republic of Turkey,
Honourable Ministers and
Heads of Delegations,
Ladies and gentlemen,**

It is a great privilege for me to extend a warm welcome to you in this 7th ECO Ministerial Meeting on Transport and Communications. I am grateful to the Government of the Republic of Turkey, in particular His Excellency Mr. Yildirim and the Ministry of Transport and Communications, for hosting this important meeting. I thank the Honourable Ministers and delegates of the ECO member states for their participation.

A very special welcome to our friends from the People's Republic of China. I also appreciate the presence of representatives of IRU, UNCTAD, ECO-CCI, the ECO-TDB and IDB.

Such distinguished participants, in the beautiful city of Antalya and in the spring month of April make a perfect setting for a very fruitful meeting. I am confident that we will have very productive deliberations today.

Excellencies,

Cooperation in the field of transport and communications is one of ECO's highest priorities. It is central to progress on all our projects, all our goals.

We have covered some more ground since we met in Tehran two years ago. Several major projects have been completed by member states. These include Gwadar Port in Pakistan, the first phase of Aktau Port in Kazakhstan, the Bafgh-Mashhad railway in Iran and the Kurgan-Kulyab railway in Tajikistan. We have a lot more to do and will make a new Programme of Action for that purpose.

Mr. Chairman,

ECO's main vehicle for transport cooperation is the Transit Transport Framework Agreement (TTFA). It has been effective since May 2006. It has a Coordination Council which monitors its implementation. It has been meeting regularly as have been its various committees. We have to maintain this momentum. The multi-sectoral nature of TTFA necessitates close coordination. We have to institute national inter-Ministerial Committees for that purpose. Equally important is it to set up the TTFA Fund to put transport cooperation on a faster track. We have initiated necessary action using the Secretariat's own resources and the support of donor agencies. However, more important for the Fund to take off are voluntary contributions by member states.

Excellencies,

Maintaining credible railway linkages are high on our agenda. We are working to make up missing links in the regional network. Three priority projects are currently under our focus. These are Van Lake in Turkey, Quetta-Taftan railway in Pakistan and Sarakh Station in Iran. IDB has pledged assistance to these projects. We have also invited ECOTDB to join in. An HLEG meeting would be convened shortly, with the participation of Iran, Turkey and Pakistan and the donor agencies.

The ECO container and passenger trains on the Istanbul-Almaty route are being streamlined. The 9th Meeting of the ECO Heads of Railway Organizations (Astana, June 2007) adopted a consolidated transit timetable. It shortened the travel time by more than 36 hours. Further time reduction and issues of tariffs and route management would be addressed by a committee of the five countries enroute. Meeting in Turkmenistan, the Committee would also address issues relating to the ECO passenger train, mainly physical and non-physical obstacles and visa problems. We are also pursuing a regional survey on the subject as recommended by the 18th RPC (Islamabad, March 2008).

ECO highly values the China-Middle East-Europe corridor. Its benefits will extend to the entire region and beyond. Starting from China, it will pass through ECO's Central Asian member states and Iran, and end up in Turkey. We are ready, indeed keen, to join hands with our Chinese friends. Our interests converge, our aims synchronize. ECO countries enjoy the best of relations with China. We shall build on these to add greater substance to transport cooperation with China.

Excellencies,

Geographic proximity, shared history and heritage, mutual goodwill and understanding are our real assets in the ECO. These give us a firm base to bring our peoples further closer to each other. Accordingly, the 18th RPC recommended launching a demonstration train from Islamabad to Tehran to Istanbul. It is a proposal perfectly feasible. The route is internationally recognized under the Trans-Asian Railway Network of UNESCAP. A key segment of this route, the Kerman-Zahedan railway, is nearing completion. Rehabilitation of Quetta-Taftan track and Van Lake are being pursued. We would shortly convene an Expert Group Meeting to settle technical details and move ahead.

In road transport, cooperation is being expanded with the implementation of TTFA. The Road Committee of TTCC (Islamabad, September 2007) took important decisions. It agreed to rationalize fee structures. Visas for drivers and related business persons would be issued within 72 hours. Transport permit quotas would be abolished. The ECO Third Party Insurance Scheme is in final stages. It will be finalized at the 2nd meeting of the Insurance Committee in Tehran in July this year.