

Informative Report

Managing Impacts of COVID-19 on Supply Chains and

Facilitating Passage of Medicine and Food supplies in

ECO Region

Introduction:

While the global trade is set to plunge as COVID-19 upends the normal economic and social activities around the world, the intraregional trade in the ECO Region has begun to equally experience considerably sharp plummet during the last two months in view of the increased restrictions and limitation on cross-border carriers of goods taking place due to the stubbornness of the pandemic. Such measures that include, locking down of cities and limiting cross-border movements, have been strictly advised by international health experts to contain further spread of coronavirus that seems to be uncontrolled due to non-availability of any required/proper vaccine or treatment of the disease. If the present situation continues, the ECO Member States and adjacent countries would most probably start exhausting their strategic and economic resources, having undesirable disconnection of trade and other activities of mutual interests, inter alia, agriculture sector as well as medicines and medical equipment. The persisting scenario may further slowdown the pace of already limited intraregional trade in the ECO region (around 8% of total trade exchange in 2019).

However, at the same time the possibility to make the ongoing situation an opportunity may not be excluded, introducing an interim mechanism to facilitate cross-border transportation of essential goods, particularly medicines and food stuff to address the fundamental needs and requirements of the most deserving nations in the ECO Region. This mechanism may be designed basing on TTFA, IRU recommendations, TIR and some WTO Health protocols as well as national concerns and practices of Member States, having simple, implementable and obviously temporary scope to secure the targets of immediate nature. Later on, such provisional setup may be used as a pattern to enhance regional cooperation in the area of Transit-Transport once the wave of COVID-19 gets over. This mechanism, in its first phase, may envisage formulation of “Guidelines” and when agreed upon, may be supplemented by “Practical Steps”

to help officials in several fields i.e. (Headquarters, Border Cross Points, Corridors, Destinations, etc.) to perform their duties in a smooth way.

Bearing in mind the existing realities on the ECO border crossings, the ECO Secretariat considers that an effective and efficient way to come out of the COVID-19's impacts is to collectively move forward. The exposures transpire that the isolation methodology alone remains less-productive, bearing no immediate recovery from such virulent pandemics.

Like natural disasters, the COVID-19 does not recognize boundaries as the pandemic's horrendous spread appears to engulf almost every segment of the human societies, pushing the peoples of the world into sequential quarantines. In the emerging situation, it is desirably advisable to all ECO Member States that an all-inclusive, effectively and efficiently made cross border coordination can help retreat the overwhelming pandemic, setting a side its negative impacts on the ECO region's social and economic progress.

In the given context, the ECO Transit Transport Framework Agreement (TTFA) can significantly contribute as a unifying factor for cross border coordination, offering an uninterrupted and smooth passage of transit transport traffic in the ECO region.

Transit transport is of vital importance for sustainable functioning of transportation links in the ECO region. Transportation by road accounts to nearly 85% in the structure of overall transport in some ECO countries whereas the average share of road transportation in the entire region stands at estimated 65% of total. In this regard, the COVID-19's entailed ban on road traffic has especially been hard on people depriving them of their genuinely needed access to basic food supplies.

Given the current situation, 'green lanes' along main international transport routes are for concerted cooperation among world nations to ensure that: all freight, including goods that are currently most needed by people be delivered to destinations with no further delay.

The current situation at ECO Border Crossing Points (BCPs)

The current situation at ECO Border Crossing Points (BCPs) is varied as under:

- At BCPs, located in the **Sistan and Balochistan Province** of the Islamic Republic of Iran and in the **Balochistan Province** of the Islamic Republic of Pakistan connecting countries along 2,430 km of

roads, free freight road traffic is allowed at Iranian side. However, the 14 days' restriction still persists at Pakistan's side. This restriction has been applied twice in an alternating manner since the outbreak of COVID-19.

- Iran maintains its BCPs open for transit via its territory by observing sanitary standards of its Health Ministry. It announces the emergency hotline number 190. For medicine, food and essential supplies further facilitation is being provided by customs. In view of the aforementioned measures to defeat COVID19, Iran calls on all ECO countries to leniently consider prevention of delays in distribution chains, logistics and transit to save lives of ordinary people (s) in the region.
- At BCP, **Astara (Azerbaijan)-Astara (Iran)** located between the Republic of Azerbaijan and the Islamic Republic of Iran, an open border practice for freight traffic proves beneficial for both the countries enabling free, smooth passage of goods and of increasing commodity supplies. Truck drivers have to observe medical protocols on arrival at BCP whereas further driving along roads in the territory of Azerbaijan is being provided a police escort thereby ensuring reliable safety & security to road transport workers.
- At BCPs, **Dogharoun-Islam Qala, and also, Milak-Zarang** connecting the Islamic Republic of Iran with the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan along 936 km of roads, free passage of freight road traffic is open on both sides.
- Turkmenistan imposed heavy restrictions at BCPs, **Serkhetabat–Tourghondi** and **Imamnazar**, connecting 744km of roads in Turkmenistan and the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan. These restrictions bear adverse effects on road truck drivers especially given long pre COVID-19 delays at aforementioned BCPs. Extended stay of truck drivers at these BCPs becomes an economic burden on truck drivers who experience deep distresses while driving through mainly mountainous, unpaved road terrain until they reach the Turkmen border crossings to face the ban.
- 4 different BCPs, **Serakhs-Sarakhs, Artyk-Lotf Abadand, Gaudan-Bajgiran and Godurolum - Incheh Borun** connecting Turkmenistan and the Islamic Republic of Iran are also closed for free passage of freight road traffic.
- The BCPs, **Gurbulak - Bazargan and Esendere – Serow**, are currently closed for free passage of freight road traffic.
- At BCP, **Termez-Hairatan**, stationed between the Republic of Uzbekistan and Islamic Republic of Afghanistan connecting the two countries along 137 km of roads, mutual restrictions remain still in place. The border is open only for humanitarian aids while it remains closed for freight services.
- At BCPs, **Ishkashim** and **Nizhny Panj-Shir Khan**, connecting along the stretch of 1,206 km of roads the Republic of Tajikistan and Islamic Republic of Afghanistan, the restrictions on Tajikistan's side have been waived off for freight road transport. On 5 April 2020 the government of Tajikistan has issued a temporary regulation concerning international freight transport in the Republic of

Tajikistan in view of COVID-19 prevention. This temporary regulation specifies the entry, exit and transit of international freight vehicles and the movement of drivers engaged in international road transport to/from the Republic of Tajikistan.

- Starting from 4 April 2020, the following border checkpoints will be closed for, passengers, freight and cargoes in Kazakhstan:
 - Checkpoints at border crossings with the Kyrgyz Republic: Aukhatti, Kordai, Sypatai Batyr, Sartobe - Zhambyl region, Kegen - Almaty region.
 - Checkpoints at border crossings with the Republic of Uzbekistan: Tselinny, Syr Darya (Turkestan region).

Given the present situation in which international road transport was mainly operated through the following checkpoints:

- In Kyrgyzstan: Karasu (Kordai region) and Aisha Bibi (bypassing Taraz in Kazakhstan) from the Talas region in Kyrgyzstan.
- In Uzbekistan: Konysbaev, Zhibek Zholy, Kaplanbek, Kazygurt, Atameken,

Conclusion:

In order to maintain steady supply chains, especially for food stuff and medicines and medical items, which are essential for the governments and the people of the ECO Member States, the annexed “Guidelines”, provides specific technical guidance under which “practical steps” at cross border points of ECO’s main transport routes and corridors maybe taken.

The proposed Guidelines have been abstracted from TTFA that are aligned with the measures currently being taken by the United Nations and International Road Transport Union (IRU). The concerted combat of spillover effects of COVID-19 is now in action focusing on transnational cross borders of main international and regional transport arteries. The Guidelines suggest that ECO regional border crossings should remain open for freight supply chains of medicine and foods supplies to support regional livelihoods.

The ongoing condition taking place due to COVID-19 might last for an indefinite period of time in view of the continued lockdowns at the BCPs in the ECO countries, effecting the available stock of livelihoods especially food supplies and medicines. The given Guidelines have been prepared in order to ensure availability of livelihoods and medicines to the genuine masses in the region and to adequately administering free passage of these essentials within ECO.

Similarly, while calling for ECO Member States to implement operational and organizational arrangements, categorizes that the measures suggested in the Guidelines will be temporary to be remained in place for the duration of the containment of the dreadful disease.