

**Statement of the ECO Secretary General,
Ambassador Khusrav Noziri
at the 26th Meeting of the Council of Ministers (COM)
*Tashkent, January 24, 2023***

**The Honourable Chairman, His Excellency Mr. Bakhtiyor Saidov, Minister of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Uzbekistan,
Honourable Ministers and the Heads of Delegation,
Excellencies,
Distinguished Participants,**

Assalam-u-Alaikum / Good morning,

Joining you at this 26th Meeting of the ECO Council of Ministers (COM) is an exceptional privilege that I am honoured to not only bear but enjoy and share as well.

I thank all the honourable Foreign Ministers and the Heads of Delegations for their kind participation in our way-paver meeting under the Chairmanship of His Excellency Mr. Bakhtiyor Saidov who has recently assumed the office. I congratulate and wish him the best for his fresh responsibilities.

As you kindly know, this important event was supposed to take place in the first week of December 2022. However, due to the pre-occupations of our honourable Foreign Ministers, the holding of 26th COM Meeting today under the Chairmanship of the Republic of Uzbekistan is an extraordinary arrangement as the Republic of Azerbaijan has already assumed the ECO Chairmanship on January 1, 2023.

I am glad and excited to note the maximum presence of our Honourable Ministers today in their 26th Meeting that makes this event exceptional and historically more imperative. I once again thank all our Ministers for their kindness and making it convenient to attend this important meeting.

Today, we have gathered to count for progress and achievements of the Organization made after the 25th interaction of the Council held at Ashgabat on November 27, 2021.

Before I brief on our activities and engagements, allow me to extend my sincere gratitude to the Republic of Uzbekistan and, in particular, H.E. Mr. Mr. Bakhtiyor Saidov for the warm hospitality and appreciable arrangements to facilitate the visiting delegations in the beautiful city of Tashkent which is recognized as one of the historical capitals in the world.

I am in no doubt to acknowledge that ECO has got an accelerated momentum while moving forward to gain on its envisioned aims and objectives under the

Chairmanship of Uzbekistan. On the brilliant initiative of the honourable President of Uzbekistan H.E. Mr. Shavkat Mirziyoyev, the Year 2022 was proclaimed as the “Year of Strengthening Connectivity” in the ECO Region.

The idea proved to be not only impressive but also successful as it paved the way to open the process of deliberation at the level of ECO Council of Permanent Representatives (CPR) thereby developing a regular concept of such year-wise titling in the ECO. To this end, I congratulate the Republic of Uzbekistan and thank H.E. President Shavkat Mirziyoyev for his caring and thoughtful leadership.

Let us reiterate our thanks to the honourable Foreign Minister of Turkmenistan, H.E. Mr. Rashid Meredov for leading the ECO in 2021. His veteran guidance and kind support of the country’s former President H.E. Gurbanguly Berdimuhamedov fueled and facilitated our common agenda, helping us make significant progress on our way to development.

Congratulating the Republic of Uzbekistan for country’s extensive support to the Organization as well as meticulous and effective ECO Chairmanship in 2022, I welcome the honourable Foreign Minister of Azerbaijan H.E. Mr. Jeyhun Bayramov who has kindly taken over the ECO Presidency for 2023 under the vibrant theme: “Year of Green Transition and Interconnectivity”.

Excellencies,

Progressing on our way based on the mandate and decisions of the 25th Meeting of the COM, as well as following the targets and ambitions framed by 15th Summit in the Ashgabat Consensus for Action, we continue our cooperative journey keeping in sight the collective welfare and wellbeing of the Member States. To this end, we maintain our resolve, consistency and progress, giving special consideration to ECO’s project-oriented approach.

The reported period witnessed some fresh developments. Details have been mentioned in this year’s Report of the Secretary General submitted for consideration of the esteemed Council. Yet, I would like to re-invite kind attention of the Council towards few of our important activities.

On trade & investment side, we are focused on: (i) trade liberation through a preferential trade framework to create trade flows and increase intra-regional trade and contribution to the global trade, especially exports; (ii) trade facilitation to reduce the cost and time of doing business to meet the targets of trade expansion and (iii) trade promotion through focused activities for boosting the region’s trade profile.

Regarding connectivity, the concept of integration seems to find no way without creating outspread transit linkages. Thus, ECO places transport corridors on top of its agenda, working on several important projects to secure our goal for strong

regional connectivity. Notable progress towards the commercialization of KTI Corridor, operationalization of ITI Cargo Train, implementation of some parts of KTAI Corridor and operationalization of ECO-ITI Road Corridor are the milestone achievements to this end.

Regarding projects, the total number of current projects stands at 37, out of which 23 are ongoing and under different stages of implementation. The number of proposed/new projects is 14. As compared to previous data in 2021, the number of ongoing projects has increased around 40 percent in 2022. Yet the sluggish projects' completion ratio is due to our shift from small-sized to medium and large scale projects.

Distinguished Delegates,

Based on the recommendation of 32nd Meeting of the ECO Regional Planning Council (RPC) held in January 2022, the honourable ECO Deputies Foreign Ministers met in May 2022 in a Brainstorming Session on ECO reform and prospects of cooperation in the region.

While taking several issues under consideration, the Session made some quite important conclusions for increasing the efficiency of the Organization, including in trade & investment, transport & connectivity, efficiency & effectiveness of the Organization, staff's recruitment policy, operationalization of ECO Vision Fund, enhancement of the sense of owner-ship and partner-ship regarding ECO Specialized Agencies, development of coordination mechanism for financing and implementing ECO projects, as well as increasing visibility and outreach of the ECO in the global landscape. The event was quite interactive and the outcomes, it produced, are helpful to determine and align our future course of actions.

In the given context, I may recall that within the concept of Uzbekistan's Chairmanship in 2022, the country proposed the establishment of a High-Level Expert Group with a view to ascertaining specific proposals and recommendations for further improvement of the ECO activities. However, noting the identical purpose of the proposed High-Level Expert Group and the held Brainstorming Session, the Member States agreed to make their merger as a single Body and Framework on Reform under the title of High-Level Committee (HLC). I am glad to state that this important proposal is included in our today's Agenda for kind consideration of the esteemed Council.

In addition, and as proposed by Uzbekistan, the establishment of a High-Level Dialogue Platform on Environmental Cooperation is also placed on Agenda of the esteemed Council.

Moreover, as desired and mandated by 25th COM Meeting in Ashgabat, the Organization has been able to successfully address the issue of dividing Member States into "Founding" and "Non-Founding" countries. As per mutually agreed

formula, the terms “Founding” and “Non-Founding” Member States will cease to exist and apply in the ECO, without prejudice to the practice developed there-under as to the assessment of rates of contribution of the Member States to ECO and the rotation of the position of the Secretary General. The development is being reported and also placed on today’s Agenda for kind consideration and further guidance by the Council.

I would also like to inform that the 33rd Meeting of the ECO Regional Planning Council (RPC) was convened in the previous week under the Chairmanship of Azerbaijan. The event organized in hybrid mode has developed the ECO Work Program and Calendar of Events for 2023.

Excellencies,

Promotion of multilateral cooperation is a key to ultimate success within the concept of regionalism. Getting where we aim and look for is very much linked to our infinite integration.

Relevantly, the ECO is determined to promote its inter-regional and global relations. The commitment to enhance worldwide visibility of the ECO is reflected in our actions and responses to consolidate and expand our collaborative network, making the existing partnerships more active and vibrant, as well as knotting some fresh ties with regional and international organizations, specifically the United Nations and its various agencies.

As we are happy to feel the pulse of 30 years’ expanded cooperation in the ECO, I objectively believe that the time has come to revisit our policy for further enlargement of the Organization. To this end, we look forward to the continued support and kind patronage of the Council.

Within the context of expansion and progress, I would also reiterate the importance of Afghanistan not only as an ECO Member State but also a key nation in the region. Overall development of the region and the restoration of peace and stability in Afghanistan are interlinked issues. Without facilitating the process of peace and stability in Afghanistan, the idea of progress and development in the region would remain impracticable.

We always remain committed to shoulder the socioeconomic development in Afghanistan and our fresh resolve to this end is reflected in the ECO Advocacy Program for Afghanistan. However, we express our deep concerns over the conditions emerged in Afghanistan during last one and half year due to the rigid initiatives of the country’s de facto administration, especially the grave violation of women right to education and work. The problems for women and girls in Afghanistan are increasing with no visible end. Afghan population is undergoing extreme poverty and shortage of food as well as other essentials necessary for survival.

The regional and international stakeholders should not wait anymore for a total collapse in the country as the application of peace, security, development and prosperity in Afghanistan guarantees the collective stability and progress in the region and beyond. ECO welcomes any shared proposals and ideas that could help reverse the deteriorating socioeconomic conditions and restoration of human rights in Afghanistan.

Distinguished Delegates,

As you are kindly aware, the role of parliaments and the parliamentary diplomacy is increasing in regional and global relations. Relevantly, I would emphasize on the significance of Parliamentary Assembly of ECO Member States (PAECO), establishment of which is one of the most milestone achievements in ECO.

On the sidelines of 3rd General Conference of the Parliamentary Assembly of ECO Member States (PAECO) held at Baku in May last year, I had the opportunity to call on the honourable Speaker of the Milli Majlis of Azerbaijan, Her Excellency Dr. Sahiba Gafarova who assumed the Presidency of PAECO in 2022. During this interaction, it was noted that PAECO, once fully operationalized, could become a difference-making forum to push and facilitate the ECO's overall agenda. Based on the conclusions of this meeting, efforts are being made to enhance coordination between the ECO and PAECO Secretariats with a view to creating inclusive and synergic line of actions from both ends.

Excellencies,

The Organization's overall progress is smooth, steady and in line with the principles of Izmir Treaty and the targets of ECO Vision 2025. However, the time is challenging especially in the post-COVID scenario. Moving ahead with one's own perceptions is not only laborious but perplexing too, particularly in this age of rapid scientific and technological advancement which is coinciding with growing economic and political rivalries. Anyway, our reinforced endeavours with kind cooperation, assistance and guidance of the Member States will keep us on track and continue to drive us to the vital path of development.

I would also like to inform that last month we celebrated 30th Anniversary of the ECO Enlargement. The Ceremony was graced by Honourable Foreign Minister of the Islamic Republic of Iran, H.E. Dr. Hossein Amir-Abdollahian as Chief Guest of the Event. Moreover, a Photo Exhibition was also arranged on the ECO Day to showcase the historical sequence and memories of the Organization together with a display of commemorative stamp depicting 30 Years of Expanded Cooperation in the ECO. To mark the ECO Day in a more eventful and memorable manner, a Special Chronicle was published and disseminated amongst the guests. The Chronicle is exclusive as it symbolizes the expansion of our common interest and

partnership. We are excited to present this exclusive ECO Edition to the respectable members of this esteemed Council.

I am further pleased to inform that within the framework of our today's Agenda, a Treaty Event is being organized wherein the Islamic Republic of Pakistan will be signing the Charter of the ECO Research Center while the Islamic Republic of Iran is set to sign the Charter of the ECO Regional Center for Risk Management of Natural Disasters. On this occasion, I encourage other Member States to kindly consider and sign these vital documents.

Moreover, I am rejoiced to recall that the Year 2023, apart from anticipating many significant activities, is expected to witness the organization of 16th Summit which is the highest-level Event in the ECO. The Organization looks forward to all ECO Member States for their valued and vibrant participation in the upcoming Summit event.

Before conclusion, I once again thank the Republic of Uzbekistan for the warm hospitality and excellent arrangements to facilitate the honourable Heads of Delegations and the accompanying members of their teams.

Once more, I would also like to extend gratitude to the honourable members of the Council for their participation and valuable contribution to make this event a success. I am convinced that the outcomes, that this forum has constructively produced, will guide us for further progress and development of the region.

While welcoming again the ECO Chairmanship of Azerbaijan in 2023, I am confident that the Organization would make more advancement under the guidance and patronage of His Excellency Minister Bayramov.

Thank you with kind wishes and regards.
