

**Statement of the ECO Secretary General,
H.E. Mr. Khusrav Noziri
at the 27th Meeting of the Council of Ministers (COM)
*Shusha, Republic of Azerbaijan, 10 October 2023***

**The Honourable Chairman, His Excellency Mr. Jeyhun Bayramov, Minister of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Azerbaijan,
Honourable Ministers and the Heads of Delegation,
Excellencies,
Distinguished Participants,**

Assalam-u-alaikum/Good morning,

Addressing this 27th Meeting of our Council of Ministers is a matter of great honour, privilege and joy for me.

I extend my sincere gratitude to the Honourable Ministers, Heads of Delegations as well as other eminent participants for kindly attending this important meeting under the chairmanship of His Excellency Mr. Jeyhun Bayramov.

Availing this opportunity, I would like to thank and felicitate the Government of Azerbaijan, particularly Excellency Bayramov and his team, for excellent arrangements to facilitate the meeting and hosting us in the beautiful city of Shusha - **ECO Tourism Capital for 2026** as it was decided just few days ago by the 5th Ministerial Meeting on Tourism held in the city of Ardabil of Iran.

Let me recall the concept of year-wise tilting in ECO which is gaining steady momentum. First introduced under their Chairmanship, the Republic of Uzbekistan proclaimed 2022 as the “Year of Strengthening Connectivity”, followed by the Republic of Azerbaijan declaring 2023 as the year of “**Green Transition and Interconnectivity**”.

While again acknowledging the guidance and invaluable support provided by His Excellency Bakhtiyar Saidov to the Organization during Uzbekistan's chairmanship in 2022, I congratulate His Excellency Jeyhun Bayramov for successfully leading the ECO in 2023.

Excellencies,

The period between the 26th and 27th COM meetings witnessed added values and acceleration in ECO activities. Based on the guidance given by ECO Heads of States/Governments in the Ashgabat Consensus for Action, as well as in line with the esteemed Council's previously made decisions and recommendations, the Organization continues with advancements towards our common interests and targets.

A comprehensive Report reflecting details of our sectoral and non-sectoral activities has already been provided to the distinguished delegations for kind consideration and their valued guidance thereon for betterment and further improvement of the Organization. Yet, I am privileged to encapsulate some of them here.

In the post-pandemic situation, the global economies continue to experience competitive tendencies. Though the year 2023 has got no exception to such aggressive trends, ECO has made strenuous efforts in the pursuit of its regional economic agenda.

Based on this year's ECO theme, we have remained engaged with our regional and global partners for the promotion of green and digital **connectivity**, setting some priorities for introducing advanced and digitalized modes of transportation in our region.

In the greater context of connectivity, we have also been endeavouring to facilitate our landlocked countries with strong

intra-regional and inter-regional linkages. Towards this goal, we maintain collaboration with our global partners, most significantly with the relevant UN Agencies. Our connectivity efforts, inter alia, are to establish an ECO Air Hub in eastern part of the region, develop and expand various corridors, including Trans-Caspian and Almaty-Tehran-Istanbul Corridors, as well as the extension of ITI Rail Corridor to Bulgaria, which is the ECO's debut initiative to link South Asia with Europe through railway connection.

Excellencies,

In **trade & investment**, our intra-regional activities in 2022 contributed only 8% to the global trade standing at US\$ 85.6 billion. Also the Foreign Direct Investments to ECO countries in 2022 remained below the potential. Given the competitive market mechanisms, ECO is primarily focused on (i) trade liberalization through a preferential trade framework; (ii) trade facilitation, and (iii) trade promotion based on our priorities. Mostly entailing export-oriented policy, our approach is targeted at attracting and increasing trade flows to the region, reducing cost and time of doing business, enhancing region's share in the global market, with an ultimate aim to boosting ECO Region's Trade Profile.

However, we note a low-paced progress towards such ends due to the ECO Trade Agreement's implementation and membership related issues. Bearing this in mind, our efforts are to ensure trade expansion through trade facilitation and customs cooperation rather than tariff reductions.

In **energy** sector, we recognize that transition towards sustainable and efficient energy resources is inevitable. In this context, the establishment of ECO Clean Energy Center in Baku is a significant step. An early operationalization of this Center will enhance energy cooperation and activities in the region.

While it is under inaugural process, we look forward to all our valued Member States to expedite their internal processes for signing/ratifying the Charter of the Center.

In energy, another flagship project is the establishment of ECO Regional Electricity Market (ECO-REM). It is aimed at making a regional umbrella for an associated power trade, leading to advanced and integrated electricity market and infrastructure in the region. We are collaborating with the Energy Charter and UNESCAP for its early launching.

Our other significant activities are to enhance regional cooperation in **tourism, food security and environment** having priorities based on our project-oriented approach. Towards these ends, some important initiatives are: (i) ECO Tourism Action Plan and the successful concept of ECO Tourism Capitals; (ii) ECO Regional Program for Food Security; (iii) Transformation of ECO Regional Coordination Center for Food security (ECO-RCCFS) from a program-based organization into a self-sustainable institution; (iv) High-Level Dialogue Platform on Environmental Cooperation in the ECO with the participation of international scientist and experts.

Regarding **project implementation**, our total number of projects currently stands at 33, while 26 are ongoing and under different stages of implementation. The number of proposed/new projects is 7. As compared to 2022, the number of ongoing projects has increased around 15% in 2023. Yet the sluggish completion ratio is due to our shift from small-sized to medium and large scale development.

Excellencies,

One of the major components of ECO Vision 2025 is to enhance **worldwide visibility of our Organization** and increase its global standing and partnerships. A biennial resolution on

UN-ECO Cooperative Relations has been recently revised and adopted by the United Nations General Assembly on August 25, 2023. The document emphasizes on the expansion of UN-ECO partnership through enhanced coordination between the ECO and the UN Agencies with a view to fuelling our regional development agenda and process.

Also, the 15th ECO-ASEAN Joint Ministerial Meeting was co-organized by the Chairmanship of Azerbaijan and Lao PDR on sidelines of the 78th UNGA session in New York on September 21. The event reviewed current status of ECO-ASEAN collaboration and agreed to further enhance their cooperative activities in areas of mutual interest through the newly adopted Framework of Cooperation. Further, on the sidelines of the High-level week, we held fruitful bilateral meetings with two UN Agencies, namely with the UN High Representative for Landlocked Developing Countries (UN-OHRLLS) and the Director of UN Office for South-South Cooperation, exploring possible areas of cooperation.

Within the scope of broadening relations amongst the nations, the role of **parliamentary diplomacy** is increasingly growing. In this regard, the Parliamentary Assembly of ECO Member States (PEACO) is an important forum to discuss our agenda of sustainable regional development. Held last year in Baku, the 3rd General Conference of PAECO highlighted the importance of inter-parliamentary cooperation for realization of the Sustainable Development Goals. To be hosted by the Islamic Republic of Iran in 2024, the 4th PAECO event is expected to make further advancements in the parliamentary relations amongst the ECO countries.

Moreover, we are also exploring maximum possibilities to expand our international relations network. Moving ahead to this end, we are pursuing for the observer-ships in various important organizations on the basis of reciprocity.

Regarding **Afghanistan**, ECO is observing the situation and global response thereon. Our commitment to supporting socioeconomic development of Afghanistan is unwaveringly intact. In this regard, we encourage all our Member States to come up with fresh and feasible proposals, figuring out a way forward for the implementation of our projects and activities based on the ECO Advocacy Program for Afghanistan.

Excellencies,

2023 is special for us as the year is now witnessing the 2nd Meeting of the COM, as well as an informal interaction of the Council held last month on sidelines of the UNGA's 78th Session. Moreover, I am happy to state that the Heads of ECO Member States/Governments are also set to meet during their **16th Summit** scheduled for November 9, 2023 in Tashkent.

Further, as you would kindly remember, the honourable ECO Deputies Foreign Ministers met in May 2022 in a brainstorming session on ECO reform and prospects of cooperation in the region; discussing also effectiveness of the Organization and increasing its visibility and outreach in the global landscape. Later, Member States agreed to form a body on reform under the title of **High-Level Committee**, as adopted by the previous COM Meeting. In this connection, I believe that wise guidance and advice of such a high-level committee would substantially empower the Organization with the ability to reform itself with a view to adapting to changing global environment and emerging challenges, while also increasing ownership and accountability of the Organization. Hence, we are eagerly looking forward to convening the High-Level Committee in the first half of 2024.

Excellencies,

The Organization is continuing with its smooth and steady progress in line with the targets of **ECO Vision 2025**. Fostering economic cooperation is an integral part of our agenda for a sustainable development in the region as mandated by the Treaty of Izmir, which strengthens our cooperative journey for a more prosperous ECO Region. Despite the challenging times especially in the post-COVID scenario, followed by geopolitical conflicts, natural and climate disasters, as regrettably witnessed by the recent earthquakes in Türkiye and floods in Pakistan - for which we reiterate our deepest sympathies, - yet I am confident that we will keep on track on the path of development with intensified cooperation.

Nevertheless, I would like to emphasize that the Organization performs its activities within a restricted budget condition due to pending financial contributions. In this regard, while expecting your kind supports for the approval of the ECO Budget 2024 before the end of this year, I also may recall that efficient functioning of the Organization depends on stable financial conditions of the Secretariat that is subject to timely receipt of contributions from our esteemed Member States.

Closing my remarks, I would like to congratulate the Republic of Azerbaijan, especially Excellency Jeyhun Bayramov, for successful ECO chairmanship in 2023. I am further privileged to welcome the ECO chairmanship of the Islamic Republic of Iran in 2024.

Again I sincerely appreciate all the distinguished delegations for their kind attendance here and wish them all the best.

Thank you.