

**Statement of the ECO Secretary General,
Ambassador Asad M. Khan
At the 28th Meeting of the Council of Ministers (COM)
Mashhad, December 3, 2024**

**His Excellency Mr. Abbas Araghchi, Honourable Foreign Minister of the Islamic Republic of Iran,
Respectable Ministers & Distinguished Heads of Delegation,
Excellencies,**

السَّلَامُ عَلَيْكُمْ
Good Morning,

We are grateful for your valued presence at this 28th Meeting of the ECO Council of Ministers, which is my first as the new Secretary General of the ECO.

This COM meeting marks a significant moment to recognize Iran's successful Chairmanship of ECO during 2024 under the theme, *"The Year of Enhanced and Resilient ECO Region through Expansion of Intra-Regional Trade."* I congratulate H.E. Abbas Araghchi, and his dedicated team for their diligence in steering ECO successfully and effectively throughout 2024.

Our sincere thanks to the Islamic Republic of Iran for the warm hospitality and excellent arrangements for this important gathering in Mashhad, a city of great historical and cultural significance.

Excellencies,

Despite being a natural fit with overlapping geography, culture, history, religion and deep rooted economic linkages, we are far from being a fully integrated economic community. We must, therefore, work harder to make ECO a platform that achieves its real promise and potential and delivers tangible benefits to our people. For this, strong leadership and active political engagement remain essential to goad our systems and bureaucracies into action to effectively leverage ECO's initiatives and platforms.

Our sectoral activities have been detailed in my annual report already provided for Your Excellencies' consideration. However, I would like to touch upon a few critical issues, candidly, if I may, that we believe require your attention and guidance.

Excellencies,

After having negotiated and finalized the ECO Trade Agreement 17 years ago, we still await its implementation with almost half of the membership yet to join it. This frankly is not a good reflection on our organization that came together to essentially promote integration of the region through trade promotion and connectivity.

Happily, after years of hiatus, we have finally secured a breakthrough, with the 9th ECOTA Cooperation Council, agreeing to review and update ECO Trade Agreement. Set for discussion at the 5th Ministerial Meeting on Commerce and Foreign Trade to be held next year, this review is expected to align ECOTA with modern trade demands, creating a roadmap for enhanced regional cooperation.

I would request all member states, whether signatories or not to ECOTA to join and contribute to this process. If we wish to go anywhere as an organization, we must find ways to instill life into this agreement. This is both necessary and doable. We know countries and regions, more diverse and competitive economies than us have achieved much closer trade integration than what we could do so far.

Moreover, trade expansion in the ECO region would remain an unfulfilled dream unless we find a way to make payments without exposing our traders and businesses to any risks. This warrants an urgent conversation between

our finance experts, which too has been pending for some time. For this, we are glad to have the support of the Senior Officials and your endorsement today for a regular and sustained conversation between our Finance Ministers including on the margins of IsDB annual meeting to develop and implement such a mechanism and address other funding related challenges. Similarly, we cannot fully harness our trade potential without creating ample B2B networking opportunities through ease of visa restrictions, as well as regular convening of trade fairs and business forums across the ECO region.

Harmonizing our regulatory standards, frameworks and accreditation procedures is also essential for enhancing trade within the region. We believe that we can achieve this by supporting the RISCAM with its early and full operationalization in 2025.

Honourable Ministers,

Connectivity remains a core priority for ECO. Through the ECO Transit Transport Framework Agreement (TTFA) and the Transit Transport Coordination Council (TTCC), we are actively advancing regional connectivity. Our goals include expanding corridors, digitizing transit procedures, and building resilient supply chains. The 13th Ministerial Meeting on Transport set for 2025 in Iran will further strengthen strategic partnerships in cross-border trade.

While having made some impressive strides in this area, challenges persist in terms of securing adequate funds, limited border capacity, lack of harmonization of procedures and visa restrictions for operators. We must find ways to closely and meaningfully collaborate with our development partners, international and regional financial institutions, particularly ECO

Trade Development Bank for securing necessary funding and addressing the barriers in the way of realizing an integrated regional transport network.

I am confident that with Kazakhstan's focus on advancing regional transport connectivity, we will be able to make important strides in this key area.

Excellencies,

There is no issue that affects us as deeply and extensively in the ECO region as climate change and environmental degradation, be it glacial melt, water stress, land degradation and desertification and shifting precipitation patterns. The need, therefore, for closer regional collaboration and formal adoption of ECO Environment Framework is clear and urgent. Yet, ironically, we have not been able to convene our environmental ministers now for over 10 years due to lack of quorum.

Given the existential threat that climate change poses to most of us, we must have sustained and result-oriented engagement to tackle climate change and achieve green growth. We are all proud to see one of our fellow members host a remarkable and successful COP in Baku, where we launched ECO Clean Energy Centre and RESCUE initiative, which need your support and attention.

Additionally, we have luckily made an important stride in agreeing for a unified regional framework for disaster preparedness across the ECO region at the 9th ECO Ministerial Meeting on Disaster Risk Reduction in Dushanbe this year.

Excellencies,

Tourism continues to be a vital means of renewing and revitalizing the centuries-old people-to-people connections among our countries. We are

placing significant emphasis on tourism promotion to encourage and facilitate this renewal. In this regard, the ECO Tourism Capitals initiative stands as our flagship program, designed to highlight our rich historical, cultural, and natural heritage to both one another and the world.

Formulate a new Vision Document for beyond 2025

Excellencies,

As we draw closer to the culmination of the ECO Vision 2025, I am delighted to highlight that the Senior Officials Meeting held yesterday has recommended the formulation of a new Vision Document for beyond 2025. This forward-looking approach is thoughtfully encapsulated in the Mashhad Communiqué, to be considered and approved by Your Excellencies, today.

Currently, one of our key challenges in achieving organizational goals is the delay in critical ECO meetings due to quorum issues and the unavailability of hosts, as well as continued delay in signing and implementing foundational ECO agreements. We urge all esteemed member countries to prioritize the ratification of these vital legal frameworks and to facilitate the timely hosting and scheduling of ECO meetings to advance our shared economic objectives.³

Additionally, strengthening engagement between the Secretariat and ECO leadership is essential, putting a visit to the ECO Secretariat on the programs of the Heads of State and Foreign Ministers visiting Tehran, and facilitating courtesy calls on them by the Secretary General during his visits to ECO countries, would help shake our systems and bureaucracies at home into action and enhance our visibility.

Excellencies,

The Secretariat remains dedicated to serving member states, though financial constraints, including global inflation, increasingly impact our work. Persistent delays in receiving annual contributions from member states

create serious challenges in the smooth functioning of our organization. Timely support is essential to sustain our programs and uphold our shared commitments. I respectfully appeal for Your Excellencies' assistance in addressing these financial limitations to ensure that we continue fulfilling our mandate effectively.

In my capacity as Secretary General, I am deeply committed to fostering transparency and dialogue among member states. With the recent launch of our Monthly Newsletter, Tourism Website and YouTube channel, the Secretariat will keep stakeholders informed of our key activities and progress, promoting a spirit of open cooperation as we work towards an interconnected and prosperous ECO region.

The Mashhad Communiqué, set for adoption today, will reaffirm and strengthen our commitment to regional integration and development. This document outlines collaborative efforts to advance economic and infrastructural ties among member states, marking a pivotal step toward a more connected and resilient ECO region.

Moreover, as recommended by our senior officials, we look forward to your kind support and approval to develop a formula for organizing ECO Summit and Council of Ministers' meetings annually under one country's chairmanship. The recommendation is aimed at achieving coherence within ECO and enhance impact of the Organization.

Excellencies,

I also take this opportunity to recall that Afghanistan has repeatedly expressed its intent in contributing to ECO's work, pending a final decision on their full-fledged participation in ECO activities. Afghanistan is a key member of ECO. It is crucial for member countries to address this issue and,

as appropriate, find ways to engage the country in ECO processes, ensuring its continued involvement in regional cooperation and development. We look forward to your guidance on this important issue.

Before concluding, I warmly welcome the Republic of Azerbaijan's gracious offer to host the 17th ECO Summit in Baku on July 3-4, 2025. I am confident that this important gathering of our leadership at this highest level will provide fresh guidance to the Organization, giving renewed momentum to the ECO's developmental goals.

At the same time, I extend my heartfelt congratulations to the Republic of Kazakhstan on its upcoming ECO Chairmanship in January 2025. Under the leadership of His Excellency Deputy Prime Minister/Foreign Minister Mr. Murat Nurtleu, I am certain that Kazakhstan will guide us forward in advancing our shared objectives.

Together, we have tremendous potential to bring prosperity and resilience to our region. I am grateful for your continued support, and I am sure that our shared vision and collective efforts will pave the way for a thriving and united ECO community.

Thank you!