

**Statement by ECO Secretary General
Ambassador Dr. Asad M. Khan
At the Senior Officials' Meeting (SOM)
*Mashhad – December 2, 2024***

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Honourable Heads and Members of the Delegation,

Excellencies,

I am privileged to join you at this Senior Officials Meeting (SOM), preparatory to the 28th ECO Council of Ministers (COM) Meeting.

Allow me to extend my profound appreciation to the Islamic Republic of Iran for their warm hospitality and excellent arrangements in the historic city of Mashhad, as well as my sincere appreciation for the presence of all our senior officials.

I take this opportunity to congratulate Iran for its effective stewardship of the Council during 2024, and thank **H.E. Seyed Jalaledin Alavi Sabzevari** for steering this Senior Officials Meeting.

Distinguished Delegates,

Today's deliberations are essential to ensure that the agenda for tomorrow's COM meeting reflects the priorities and aspirations of our region. Together, we will review the draft Mashhad Communiqué, a document that aims to solidify our collective vision for regional integration and cooperation. It is imperative that this Communiqué captures the essence of our shared ambitions and aligns with the strategic goals outlined in the ECO Vision 2025.

Excellencies,

Our sectoral activities have been detailed in my annual report which has already been provided for your kind review. However, I would like to briefly present some highlights of our key priorities in various sectors.

A key focus in advancing regional trade integration is the ECO Trade Agreement (ECOTA). The Organization successfully convened the 9th ECOTA Cooperation Council on July 30-31, 2024 in Islamabad, after a five-year gap. The meeting achieved a breakthrough agreement, with recommendations to amend and review the ECOTA at the 5th Ministerial Meeting of Commerce and Foreign Trade, to be organized early next year. The new round of negotiations will focus on enhancing the agreement's potential and fostering broader membership, particularly through updated trade data sharing and participation from non-ECOTA member states. The ongoing efforts are critical to achieving the region's trade liberalization goals and objectives.

In parallel, the Secretariat continues its efforts in customs cooperation, with the development of the Draft ECO Trade Facilitation Strategy, aimed at enhancing e-commerce and streamlining trade procedures. I kindly request the support of all Member States in finalizing this strategy and in operationalizing the ECO Smuggling and Customs Offenses Databank.

Furthermore, we are working to enhance financial cooperation in the region through establishing an ECO Clearing Union (ECU) based on the Asian Clearing Union model. This initiative introduced in 2014 seeks to provide a reliable financial solution among Central Banks of ECO member states to facilitate intra-regional trade by addressing financial barriers and reducing transaction costs and delays. The 1st Expert Group Meeting on Banking and Financial Matters in 2021 mandated the Secretariat to convene a Working Group of Central Banks to define the Terms of Reference and determine the way forward for the ECU. However, this meeting could not be held due to quorum issues. The Secretariat is now preparing to organize the 2nd Expert Group Meeting on Banking and Financial Matters, with renewed efforts to advance the initiative.

Investment promotion also remains a priority, with the ECO Member States encouraged to implement the "Agreement on Protection and Promotion of Investment" to boost investor confidence. Besides, the Secretariat continues to organize capacity-building initiatives, such as the successful online training on international standardization, and will continue to support initiatives that promote a business-friendly environment across the region.

Similarly, we cannot fully unlock our trade potential without facilitating ample B2B networking opportunities. This requires easing visa restrictions and regularly organizing trade fairs and business forums across the ECO region.

I urge all Member States to actively engage in these initiatives, as these efforts are central to realizing our collective economic potential and achieving sustainable growth.

Dear Participants,

Connectivity also remains a core priority for ECO, as underscored in my recent interactions with our esteemed Ministers in New York, Ashgabat and Tashkent. Through initiatives like the ECO Transit Transport Framework Agreement (TTFA) and the Transit Transport Coordination Council (TTCC), we are advancing sustainable regional connectivity to enhance trade and economic integration. Our key efforts include expanding transport corridors, digitizing transit procedures, and building resilient supply chains. The upcoming 13th Ministerial Meeting on Transport in 2025 will further strengthen strategic partnerships in cross-border trade.

In line with our 2024 theme, "Enhanced and Resilient ECO Region through Expansion of Intra-Regional Trade," the Organization has made notable progress in regional connectivity and ICT. This includes organizing the 15th Meeting of ECO Railway Authorities, coordinating with UNECE on transnational corridors, and working on the establishment of ECO Joint Border Trade Zones (ECO-JBTZs) in Iran and Turkmenistan. However, challenges such as limited border capacity, visa restrictions for operators, and the need for harmonized procedures persist. Continued collaboration with international partners like the Islamic Development Bank, UNECE, IRU and UNESCAP is essential to overcoming these barriers and building a more integrated and resilient transport network.

Our collective efforts also align with advancing the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), as demonstrated through participation in international transport meetings, workshops on ICT technologies and focused initiatives on diversifying transport routes. These efforts emphasize a “Network Approach” to ensure resilient supply chains and mitigate risks arising from geopolitical tensions. Nevertheless, challenges like the accession of all Member States to TTFA, infrastructure gaps and digitalization hurdles remain. Addressing these requires continued support from our international partners and joint action to further strengthen regional connectivity.

Eminent Participants,

The ECO region is actively advancing its energy and environmental agenda through collaborative efforts aimed at sustainable development and resilience. Key initiatives include the ECO-UNIDO project, which established the ECO Clean Energy Centre in Baku during COP29 in 2024, and the ECO Regional Electricity Market (ECO-REM) project, supported by ESCAP. ECO-REM seeks to integrate regional electricity markets, promote policy reforms, and enable multilateral power trading, with a comprehensive roadmap expected by the end of 2024. These initiatives reflect a shared commitment to energy cooperation and environmental sustainability.

At the same time, the region faces significant environmental challenges, including climate change, glacial melt, water stress, land degradation, desertification, and shifting precipitation patterns. These issues pose an existential threat, underscoring the urgent need for closer regional collaboration. Efforts such as the ECO Cooperation Framework for Environment (2023-2030), which emphasizes low-carbon development and climate adaptation, and the "ECO Energy Strategy and Action Plan 2030," reinforce our commitment to addressing these challenges strategically.

Further achievements, such as the RESCUE initiative launched at COP29, the 9th ECO Ministerial Meeting on Disaster Risk Reduction in Dushanbe, and strengthened partnerships with WHO, showcase the region's collective resolve to build resilience, enhance resource efficiency, and implement sustainable practices to mitigate both environmental and disaster-related risks. These milestones demonstrate ECO's dedication to a greener and more sustainable future.

Besides, ECO is dedicated to enhancing agricultural development and food security across the region, focusing on mitigating food insecurity and malnutrition worsened by climate change, environmental degradation and public health risks. Our key initiatives such as the ECO Regional Program for Food Security (ECO-RPFS) and the upgraded ECO Regional Coordination Center for Food Security (ECO-RCCFS) provide a coordinated and sustainable approach to these challenges. Alongside these, the ECO Permanent Veterinary Commission (ECO-VECO) plays a crucial role in addressing regional animal health, improving disease control and fostering cross-border cooperation to ensure sustainable economic growth through better livestock management.

Further supporting sustainable growth, ECO promotes regional cooperation in sectors like industrial standards, agricultural productivity and green transformation. The ECO-RISCAM enhances regional trade by harmonizing quality management standards, while the ECO Seed Association (ECOSA) focuses on improving seed quality to boost agricultural productivity. The green transformation of industries and SMEs is prioritized through workshops and expert meetings, facilitating eco-friendly practices and

innovations. Additionally, the ECO Agricultural Biotechnology Network (ECO-ABN) and the ECO Nanotechnology Network foster technological collaboration in agriculture, enhancing food quality, crop yields, and resource management across member states. These initiatives align with ECO Vision 2025, which underscores the importance of supportive legal frameworks, particularly for Industrial Property Rights (IPRs), to drive innovation in green technologies.

Excellencies,

Our efforts in the tourism sector focus on enhancing collaboration among ECO Member States and increasing tourism's contribution to regional economic development. The 5th ECO Ministerial Meeting on Tourism, held in October 2023 in Ardabil, Iran, resulted in the adoption of the Ardabil Declaration, which reaffirms our commitment to sustainable tourism.

The ECO Tourism Capitals initiative, aimed at showcasing the diverse cultural and tourism assets of the region, has designated various cities to hold this prestigious title. Following the previous designations of Dushanbe (2020–2021), Sari (2022), and Ardabil (2023), Shahrizabz, Uzbekistan, is the current ECO Tourism Capital for 2024, with Erzurum, Türkiye, set for 2025, and Shusha, Azerbaijan, for 2026. Notably, for the first time, nominations for the 2027 title have been received from Kyrgyzstan, Pakistan, and Turkmenistan. Given the immense interest being taken by the member states, we are in the process of reviewing the selection criteria to ensure fair and strategic decisions in future.

Our commitment to sustainable tourism is also evident in the establishment of the ECO Advisory Committee on Tourism, which aims to guide regional strategies. We are enhancing tourism education through the ECO Tourism Educational Network (ECO-TEN), planned for 2025. We continue to work on developing digital platforms, such as the ECO tourism website and YouTube channel to be launched during this SOM, to promote our member states' tourism offerings. With initiatives like the "Common Criteria on Sustainability for Accommodation Facilities," we aim to enhance quality and sustainability across the region, fostering a vibrant, collaborative and economically impactful tourism sector.

During the year, we also prioritized Human Resources and Sustainable Development through close collaboration with UN agencies and regional partners. Our notable efforts included a joint workshop with IOM to combat trafficking and the establishment of the High Level Sustainable Development Working Group (HLSDWG) to promote policy coherence in sustainable development. Very soon, Turkmenistan is set to host the inaugural ECO Forum on Sustainable Development, providing a valuable platform for the exchange of best sustainable practices.

Distinguished Delegates,

ECO Secretariat's capacity to conceive, frame and implement projects that can secure funding support from member states and our development partners remains critical. Enhancing Secretariat's capacity, in this regard, is crucial to implement our development agenda and vision. Presently, 35 projects are underway across various stages of development, with the exception of activities in Afghanistan, which are temporarily paused due to the current situation.

Afghanistan has consistently demonstrated its willingness to contribute to the organization's initiatives, though its full participation remains under review. Addressing this matter is essential, and member states must consider creative approaches to ensure Afghanistan's meaningful engagement in ECO processes.

In Economic Research, significant efforts are being made towards the operationalization of the ECO Research Centre. Moreover, the publication of the ECO Economic Journal has been supported by contributions from ECO institutions. The 2023 ECO Annual Economic Report, along with recent meetings on statistical data, has further propelled regional economic research and initiatives for data sharing. Additionally, upcoming training sessions and a forthcoming Memorandum of Understanding with SESRIC are set to strengthen collaboration in this important area within ECO.

Parliamentary cooperation is fundamental to bolstering legislative backing for our ongoing initiatives. In this regard, the Parliamentary Assembly of ECO Member Countries (PAECO) serves as a cornerstone of our efforts. So far, the PAECO Charter has been endorsed by Pakistan, Iran, Azerbaijan and Türkiye, with Tajikistan and Uzbekistan also set to be the part of this vital initiative. PAECO has already held three successful General Conferences, with Iran set to host the upcoming fourth. I strongly encourage the remaining ECO Member States to endorse and ratify the PAECO Charter, as it is instrumental in fostering regional integration and advancing our shared objectives.

Strengthening our international relations is also central to ECO's strategic vision, enabling us to amplify our presence and influence on the global stage. During my speech at the United Nations Summit of the Future, I underscored the pivotal role of regional cooperation in advancing multilateralism—an objective we actively pursue through collaboration with UN bodies on joint initiatives.

Our recent engagements, including the ECO Informal Council of Ministers' Meeting and the 16th ECO-ASEAN Joint Ministerial Meeting on September 27, 2024, reaffirmed this commitment. However, it is vital to stress the need for deeper political involvement and ownership from all ECO members, as participation in key meetings, especially those in New York, fell short of expectations. To realize ECO's full potential and drive regional progress, it is essential that we prioritize and invest in our collective efforts.

Excellencies,

Strengthening the ECO's institutional capacity is also essential for enhancing its responsiveness and efficiency. The establishment of the High-Level Committee of ECO Deputy Foreign Ministers provides a valuable opportunity to deliberate on comprehensive reforms. However, the Committee has yet to convene due to quorum issues. This underscores the need for renewed commitment from all member states to ensure the timely convening of such critical meetings. This forum can serve as a catalyst for shaping a more dynamic ECO that effectively addresses the evolving priorities of our member states.

Moreover, bolstering engagement between the Secretariat and ECO leadership is vital for effective follow-up and implementation of decisions. Encouraging visits by Heads of State and Foreign Ministers to the Secretariat during their presence in Tehran, as well as fostering their direct interactions with the Secretary General during his visits to member states, will strengthen our coordination and visibility.

I am glad that we have agreed and reflected on urging all member states to sign and ratify key instruments that are at the heart of our work in ECO. This must now translate into action.

Dear Colleagues,

Before concluding, let me say that at this SOM you have three important issues that we believe require your attention and consideration for making appropriate recommendations to the Honourable Ministers tomorrow.

First, to make ECOTA work efficiently, we must find ways to protect our businesses from transaction-related risks. Establishing a regional payment system is essential to achieving this goal. To advance this initiative, we must have our Finance Ministers come together to address this and other funding-related challenges faced by ECO. Such a meeting could be scheduled on the margins of the IsDB Annual Meeting in 2025.

Second, based on the experiences of the past several years, it is felt that the dichotomy of having the ECO Summit biennially and Council of Ministers annually under two different chairs, has not served the best interests of the Organization. To achieve coherence and enhance the Organization's effectiveness, we should consider holding both meetings annually under one country's chairmanship.

Third, as we head towards the end of the Vision 2025 timeframe, we must decide whether to extend the existing framework or develop a new one. Our deliberations must result in clear and concrete recommendations to our Ministers on this critical matter. The Secretariat will be happy to provide appropriate formulation for your consideration, if required.

I look forward to your valuable contributions and thank you for your unwavering commitment to the ECO's goals.

Thank you.