

**Statement by H.E. Mr. Elmar Mammadyarov, the Minister of Foreign Affairs
of the Republic of Azerbaijan at the 21st Meeting of Council of Ministers
(Tehran, 26th November, 2013)**

**Distinguished Ministers and Heads of Delegation,
Ladies and Gentlemen,
Dear Colleagues,**

I am pleased to express my greetings to all participants of the Council of Ministers Meeting. I would also like to convey our profound appreciation to the Government of the Iran Islamic Republic for the generous hospitality extended to us and excellent organization of the meeting.

It is also a deep pleasure and honour on behalf of the government of Azerbaijan of having the Chairmanship of the Council and the ongoing chairmanship of organization.

The meeting of the Council presents us an opportunity to take further the achievements that emerged during the Organization's last year engagement. At the same time, this debate will provide a chance for broader strategic discussions on how to strengthen the economic dimension of our regional cooperation.

No doubt, through the report of the ECO Secretary-General, ECO institutions and your interventions, we will be much informed about the progress made in the implementation of the decisions and initiatives we previously approved.

Dear Colleagues,

Today ECO countries are emerging as vibrant economies and are known for their strive for an enabling business environment, competitiveness and openness to innovation.

We are very pleased to observe that regional integration efforts are also deepening in terms of increased trade and investment flows, commercial ties as well as intra-regional transport infrastructure development. These are promising signs, but we need to further build on them and explore other mutual economic opportunities.

We are of the view that, in this context, special emphasis should be placed on the efforts towards trade and transport facilitation, including simplification of border crossing procedures. These measures can enable us to take full benefit of the existing physical regional infrastructure.

Regional infrastructure development should remain as a priority on our cooperation agenda. In particular, ECO should aim at the modernization of railway

routes and related infrastructure as well as creation of common railway network and its interconnection with European and Middle East networks. The early completion of the ongoing railway projects of regional importance, including Qazvin-Rasht-Astara (Iran) – Astara (Azerbaijan) will create new attractive transit opportunities for countries of the region. In this regard, we welcome the conduction of second High-level Working Group on this project that was held recently and hope that those meetings will serve as a useful platform for generating effective outcomes. We thank ECO Secretariat for its efforts and support in realization of this project.

In 2013, Azerbaijan joined the space club with its launch of its satellite and after this event we became 39th among 148 countries for global competitiveness index according to the World Economic Forum's "Global Competitiveness Report 2013-2014". Such national achievements provide additional opportunities to foster intra-regional interaction. In this context, I am pleased to note that Azerbaijan expressed its willingness to contribute to the development of ICT and e-government sphere in Afghanistan. Besides, we also expect that recent initiative of Azerbaijan to establish high-speed fibro-optic internet highway from West to East, which was supported by UN resolution also co-sponsored by 21 countries, including most of the ECO members, will open a new chapter in our intra and inter-regional cooperation.

We remain confident that finding creative ways and means to improve the existing mechanism of multilateral cooperation within the ECO would eventually speed up the integration processes. This will also improve the current performance of our Organization. We should start with the review of core activities through the prism of impact assessment.

Azerbaijan supports the process of reforms in the ECO to transform the Organization into an effective and efficient body. We hope that we can join our efforts and provide a possibility for elaboration of actions for further development of the ECO, in particular to improve statutory documents, upgrade legal and institutional capacities within ECO, also streamline working methods. Taking into account expected impact of synergies as well as comparative advantage of individual countries in respective fields, we recognize a need for short-listing of priority areas for cooperation.

Enhancement of cooperation in the area of science and research could also make positive shift towards promotion of knowledge based on regional development. Therefore, we believe that the establishment of the ECO Research Center and early adoption of the Charter of ECO Research Center can play a catalytic role for achieving these objectives. Taking this opportunity, I kindly request all the Member States to offer their support to this initiative.

On the other hand, predictability and sustainability of funding is very important issue for the functioning of the Organisation. While recognizing the need for timely payments to the ECO regular budget, we cannot underestimate the importance of fund-raising activities of ECO and its institutions.

Dear Colleagues,

Last, but not least, we should not forget that security and stability of every Member State is inseparably linked to the security of other Member States. Without resolution of protracted conflicts as well as ensuring security and stability in the region, ECO will fail to fully reap the benefits of comprehensive regional cooperation. But, unfortunately, we sometimes don't pay the adequate attention that these issues require

Within ECO the South Caucasus is yet another region suffering from protracted conflicts. Armenian-Azerbaijan conflict still remains a major source of instability and impediment to the economic development and full-scale regional cooperation. With restoration of the sovereignty, territorial integrity and inviolability of the internationally recognized borders of the Republic of Azerbaijan I believe there will be win-win developments to every player in the region.

ECO is as strong and functioning as it is individual components, that it is – the Member States and ECO institutions along with activities they pursue. We should consolidate our efforts in order to help the Organization to enhance its added value which ECO provides in our regional cooperation and strengthen its position in the our regions.

In conclusion, on behalf of my delegation I would also like to thank all our experts for their efforts to reach common position on the Tehran Communiqué.

Thank you
