

**Statement by H.E. Ambassador Dr. Shamil Aleskerov, ECO Secretary General
at the 24th Meeting of the Regional Planning Council
(23-26 February, 2014 – ECO Secretariat)**

**Excellencies,
Distinguished Delegates,
Ladies and Gentlemen,**

Allow me to warmly welcome you to the ECO Headquarters and to the 24th Regional Planning Council (RPC) meeting held here this morning. I am pleased to be with you for this important event and I would like to thank the distinguished delegates particularly those who have come all the way from their respective countries to participate in this meeting and enrich our discussions. Your presence here shows the commitment of your respective governments to the goals and objectives of the ECO. I would also like to thank the MFA of the IRI and the Missions of the Member States in Tehran for their contribution to convening this meeting here in Tehran and for all assistance extended to the delegates participating in the RPC.

Dear Colleagues,

The Regional Planning Council (RPC) is a planning forum of our organization and accordingly it has the duty to discuss and recommend all the future activities of ECO. It has the duty and capacity to review the past work programmes and evolve new projects and programmes for realizing effective organization. Basically this forum shapes the future of the organization. That's why it is difficult to overestimate the importance of the work of this forum for our regional cooperation. Once more, I would like to thank all of you for the participation and the insights that you bring with you to the meeting.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

Now let me dwell briefly on our activities in different fields of cooperation. Since we last met in Tehran for the 23rd RPC meeting, there has been noticeable progress in most of the directions of our joint work. However, I would like to limit myself to only most important achievements that have taken place since our last meeting and pending matters requiring due attention.

As you know, increased trade cooperation among Member States leading to regional economic integration is central to the success of ECO. In pursuance of this objective, the organization has put in place the necessary legal framework and institutional mechanism. It is a matter of satisfaction that the share of intra ECO trade in the global trade of the Member States has recently increased from 8% to 10%. However, we have to admit that the current level of intra-ECO trade is still well below its potential.

For this year two ECO Ministerial Meetings to be organized by the directorate of trade and investment of the Secretariat are scheduled. Unfortunately, one of them which is the 5th Ministerial Meeting on Foreign Trade was postponed three times last year due to lack of quorum. And we should hold it this year, so that we can move further in this important field of cooperation. And we should not fail with holding the 4th Ministerial Meeting on Finance and Economy this year. I urge all member states to actively participate in these Ministerial Meetings at the appropriate level.

ECO's flagship agreement for trade liberalization and enhancing intra region trade is the ECOTA. So far four meetings of the ECOTA Cooperation Council, the implementing body for ECOTA, have been held. The 5th Meeting of the ECOTA Cooperation Council will be held on April 2-3, 2014 in Islamabad where dates for effectuation of tariff concessions under ECOTA will be announced. In order to facilitate the implementation of ECOTA and in pursuance of the decisions of the 4th meeting of the Cooperation Council, the Secretariat prepared and circulated a roadmap for implementation of ECOTA. Taking this opportunity I request the Member States which have not already done so to complete all legal procedures and requirements for implementation of ECOTA without further delay.

There is some progress in preparing a comprehensive draft ECO Trade Facilitation Agreement and the Agreement on Establishment and Operation of ECO Smuggling and Customs Offences Data Bank. Joint Trade Promotion Activities, Single Window activities in trade(Trade Facilitation and e-Business), the establishment of the ECO Re-insurance Company and operationalization of ECO Trade and Development Bank (ECOTDB) are the other areas where we are observing progress.

The Agreement on Promotion and Protection of Investment (APPI) envisages for common policy and common action for attracting investment in the ECO region. It has been signed by several Member States and now the Agreement is being submitted during the RPC Meeting for the signature of the remaining Member States.

The ECO-UNIDO Project on Trade Capacity Building, the activities to support WTO accession of some of the Member States and the activities to promote private sector economic and commercial cooperation are the other areas where we are observing progress too.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

Transport and communication is another area of our main focus. With pleasure I would like to announce that the first phase of ECO/IDB Joint Project on implementation of Transit Transport Framework Agreement (TTFA) has been successfully completed. Now we are in contact with IDB to start the second phase of the project. The ECO Road Network Development Plan was approved by the 6th Road Committee of the TTCC, held in Tehran in December 2013.

There is a significant progress achieved in the construction of the segments of Kazakhstan-Turkmenistan-Iran railway. The efforts to resume ECO Container Train on Islamabad-Tehran-Istanbul (ITI) Route, Kyrgyz Republic-Tajikistan-Afghanistan-Iran railway (KTAI) and Qazvin-Rasht-Astara (Iran)- Astara (Azerbaijan) railway are continuing.

The project for Regular Monitoring of Trucks (ECORMT) and a TIR Pilot Project for Islamabad-Tehran-Istanbul (ITI) Road Corridor has been prepared in partnership with IRU. On the other hand, the test runs will begin on the Kyrgyz Republic-Tajikistan-Afghanistan-Iran Road Corridor (KTAI) in 2014. We are also working with IRU to reactivate the TIR system in Afghanistan and its introduction in Pakistan.

The activities for development of ICT infrastructure and services, improving international roaming, combating cyber crimes, regulatory matters, ICT training, and establishment of ECO ICT association are being pursued by ECO, including through holding the second Ministerial Meeting to be hosted by the Islamic Republic of Pakistan in 2014.

Excellencies, Ladies and Gentlemen,

Constituting more than 20 percent of the overall value-added and employing nearly 40 percent of total active population of the region, agriculture is one of the major source of growth and development of ECO region. The region is very rich in variety of soil, environmental and climatic conditions, suitable for crop and livestock diversification. Despite modest increases seen in recent years there is still an untapped potential for the growth of agricultural production and trade.

The ECO Regional Programme for Food Security (RPFS), prepared with the technical assistance of FAO focuses on enhancing agricultural production and trade of agro-products in the ECO Member States. The Program comprises 9 regional components along with various national projects. The implementation of the 8th component "Strengthening of Regional Seed Supply" has already begun and financing has been ensured by IDB for various national projects under RPFS. The Regional Coordination Center (RCC) for implementation of the RPFS which was inaugurated in Ankara, started its work in 2013.

The ECO Seed Association (ECOSA), the ECO Regional Center for Risk Management of Natural Disasters (ECO-RCRM), ECO Permanent Veterinary Commission, (ECO-VECO), the ECO Meteorological Calibration Centre (ECO MCC) and the ECO Center for Efficient Utilization of Water for Agriculture (ECO CEUW) are the institutions that should contribute to the agriculture development in our region.

In the field of industry, ECO is trying to make progress in the establishment of the RISCAM (Regional Institution for Standardization, Conformity Assessment,

Accreditation and Metrology), harmonizing the industrial standards within the Region. However more efforts to strengthen cooperation in this field are required.

The secretariat considers tourism as another important area for cooperation, with great potential. With its diverse nature, cultural and historical heritage, ECO region has a great tourism potential to be explored and developed for the benefit of Member States. The 3rd Ministerial Meeting on Tourism which will be held in Turkey this year, is also expected to be an important platform for exchanging views among decision makers of the Member States for the policies to be pursued in the future.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

Energy is one of the critical sectors in our region. The Secretariat is striving to implement the Plan of Action on Energy/Petroleum Cooperation in the region through a closer cooperation among Member States. With this regard a significant number of events were held during the last year. The 3-d ECO ministerial meeting on Energy/Petroleum held in Tehran last year was a milestone with important outcome to be followed by us vigorously. The 3rd High Level Experts Group (HLEG) Meeting on Energy is planned to be held in 2014 in Iran. The Meeting will follow up and exchange the views on the implementation of the ECO Plan of Action for Energy/Petroleum Cooperation (2011-2015), as well as may consider new platforms for Energy Cooperation in ECO Region. The Secretariat also strived to promote the establishment of an ECO Regional Electricity Market with the cooperation of various Member states and international organizations. Another area of cooperation actively pursued is the development of alternative and renewable sources of energy. 2nd Meeting of the ECO Experts Group on Renewable Energy Sources (RES) and the 4th Workshop on RES were held on 20-22 November 2013 in Baku and Gobustan, in the Republic of Azerbaijan. The events served as a suitable platforms to discuss latest developments on RES, implementation of the related activities, as well as exchange of views on the implementation of the ECO Plan of Action in the field of RES. The events also had valuable outcomes for future regional cooperation among ECO countries in the field of RES, which will require proper follow up by all stakeholders. A number of workshops and training courses on different topics of oil industry were also organized in the IRI and Azerbaijan. We should maintain the momentum gained in this field of cooperation.

The ECO region is one of the most minerals rich region of the world. Therefore, the cooperation in this area is important. While last year the cooperation in this field was limited, we believe that we will witness more active work and holding of several planned meetings this year.

In the field of the environment there is a need for more coordinated and active participation of respective organizations of the ECO member states in the implementation of the Framework Plan of Action on Environmental Cooperation and Global Warming. The implementation of the Framework Plan of Action on Environmental Cooperation and Global Warming is being monitored through the annual National Progress Reports.

**Excellencies,
Ladies and Gentlemen,**

Human capital development is among the most important building blocks of Economic Development, especially when it comes to people-centered development. Economic development will in one or another way enlarge people's choices and capabilities which in turn enhance economic and social development of the countries and regions. This is exactly what Izmir Treaty clearly attests to in defining the objectives of the Organization. ECO Secretariat in cooperation with the interested Member States developed some supporting frameworks for collective regional cooperation in areas such as health, HRD and natural disaster management.

On human resource development we are in the process of implementation of the recommendations of the first High Level Expert Group Meeting. The priority areas for cooperation in this field have been defined by the experts which primarily address the HRD needs of public sectors.

Given the fact that ECO Region is highly vulnerable to different kinds of calamities, disaster risk management stands high in the work of the Organization.

We believe that the "7th ECO International Conference on Disaster Risk Management" planned for June 2014, in the Republic of Azerbaijan, will give us an opportunity to benefit from the individual experiences of member countries and relevant organizations on how to deal collectively with this important regional concern.

In recent years, there has been more frequent incidences of crimes and criminal behaviour associated with illegal trafficking of narcotic and psychotropic substances. This calls for prompt and concerted measures to remedy this alarming situation, and the need for an all encompassing regional strategy to eradicate the menace of organized crimes in their all forms and manifestations is strongly felt. The fight against production, transportation and distribution of narcotics requires, first and foremost, enhanced cooperation among Member Countries specially those neighboring Afghanistan. Along the same line, the implementation of the EU-funded project on Fight Against Trafficking from/to Afghanistan with the ECO Member States is still ongoing.

We are moving in a cohesive manner towards the implementation of decisions of the three ECO Interior Ministers Meetings held in Tehran, Ashgabat and Istanbul respectively. As guided by the Ministers, ECO has been pursuing more expeditious implementation of security plans through mainstreaming such plans into national policies, strengthening the regional police cooperation on illicit drug trafficking as well as facilitating access to the criminal data of the Member States. In line with the ministerial directive to implement a joint regional strategy on combating drugs, terrorism and trans-national organized crime, a series of technical and training meetings have been organized by Drug and Organized Crime Coordination Unit (DOCCU) with a view to enhancing the capacities of the law enforcement officials, raising awareness and

establishing cooperative mechanism among the Member States. We are also in the pursuit of establishing ECOPOL to develop operational support to help interested Member States meet the growing challenges of fighting transnational crimes. Additionally, the ECO Regional Center for Cooperation of Anti Corruption Agencies and Ombudsmen (RCCACO) has been established and awaits its early operationalization. The Center is aimed to, among others, facilitate implementation of the corruption mitigation strategies.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

As ECO Secretariat follows the wishes of our Member States, we are trying to transform the organization mostly to a projects based one. That's why the project implementation and the follow up procedures are important. Projects implementation of the Organization is coordinated by the Project Monitoring Group (PMG), composed of the senior management of the Secretariat and interested Member States. Outcomes of PMG meetings and the latest projects updates are regularly published on the ECO website and are reported to the Member States by the Secretariat.

On the other hand, the activities related to Economic research are continued. ECO Plan of Action on Economic Research as the road map for development of economic policy guidelines, strategies and research activities in the region, was reviewed recently. Also ECO Annual Economic Report for 2012 has been compiled and published on the ECO website. The Report for 2013 is currently being worked out and will be completed upon receipt of statistical indicators and economic data for 2013 from the Member States. The process toward the establishment of ECO Research Centre is an ongoing process and its basic document has been approved by the relevant decision making bodies of the ECO.

The activity of collecting statistics is another important action which help policy makers to form their respective policies. ECO Statistical Network (ECOSTAT) is the main mechanism for development of statistical cooperation in the region. The Secretariat continues collecting statistics through this mechanism and provides last updates of statistical data and information for the Member States.

Excellencies, Distinguished participants,

Development and promotion of mutually beneficial relations with the UN system and other regional and international organizations is vital for the ECO and its efforts towards regional economic integration. The period since the last RPC Meeting has witnessed important developments in this regard.

Efforts have been made to consolidate and further the cooperative relations with the UN system. As a result of these efforts, ECO's relations with UNIDO, FAO, UNECE, UNCTAD, UNESCAP and UNODC are gaining strength. Growing ties with UNIDO and

FAO in the sectors of industrial development, trade capacity building and food security, respectively, are also encouraging.

Significance is also attached to ECO's relations with other regional and international organizations, which share similar agendas. In this regard, the Secretariat is taking steps to further enhance its cooperation with these organizations including ASEAN, Developing-8 and CICA. Steps have also been taken to promote ECO's cooperation with its Observers (Turkish Cypriot State and the Turkic Council) in the light of relevant modalities governing their relationship.

In the coming period the Secretariat would enhance its efforts for the pursuit of its objectives. In this regard, utmost importance would be given to obtaining technical and financial assistance for ECO's projects and programmes in various areas and to promote the visibility and standing of the Organization. It is believed that the Member States would provide their support and guidance in this regard. During the present RPC meeting the opportunities of utilizing relations with different international agencies for implementing and strengthening ECO's activities should be given due attention and reflected in the outcome of the review sessions and final document.

**Excellencies,
Distinguished participants,**

Another important development for ECO was the establishment of the Parliamentary Assembly of Economic Cooperation Organization (PAECO) last year during its inaugural Conference held in Pakistan. And it has already acquired an observer status at the Inter-Parliamentary Union (IPU).

ECO advocacy approach to Afghanistan has always been getting more weight in our Organization. The Region will not develop collectively unless member countries enjoy development and growth locally. The ECO Special Fund for the Reconstruction of Afghanistan (SFRA) was created on the same merit. Four projects have been partly or totally financed by the Fund, thanks to the ECO donor countries. In line with the request made by the 21st ECO Council of Ministers, we expect that Member States consider early pledges and contributions to the SFRA thereby enabling the Secretariat to fund the ongoing projects as well as new projects in Afghanistan.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

We in the Secretariat believe that throughout this RPC, we need to take a modified approach for planning our future work. It was observed, unfortunately, that the implementation ratio of our planned events is far from satisfying. For example the ratios for past two years were approximately around %40. We can count several reasons to explain this result. But to my understanding the most important reason is non-realistic preparation of annual calendar of events. Such an approach results in this huge number of non-held events year by year and create significant erosion in the very concept of our cooperation.

Therefore, I would like to request the esteemed delegates that while finalizing the calendar of events, they may consider to approve only those events, which are realistic and very important for the progress of our organization. I also would like to request the delegates that only the events that have their hosts, venues and, preferably, timing be approved. Otherwise, within the course of the year, usually it's impossible to find the host and hold the event. Sometimes just because of this uncertainty, even when the host is found, because of the lack of time and quorum it is impossible to hold the events. Of course some events may be held at the ECO Secretariat, but it could be a limited number. Therefore I request all ECO member states and their delegations to be more active in respect of hosting ECO events as a part of their ownership of this organization and contribution to its activity.

The 21st Meeting of the ECO Council of Ministers in November 2013 mandated us to conduct a reform process based on the EPG recommendations with a further look into the regulatory, institutional and budgetary aspects of the Organization with a view to making ECO more efficient and better responding to the needs and aspirations of its member states. I will elaborate more on this issue under respective agenda item later today.

Concluding, I would like to thank you again for the participation and wish a successful outcome of the meeting.
