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The 23<sup>rd</sup> Meeting of the Council of Ministers of the Economic Cooperation Organization (ECO) was held on 16-17 April 2018 at Dushanbe-Republic of Tajikistan. The Meeting was attended all ten member states, three observers namely, the Turkish Cypriot State, the Cooperation Council of Turkic Speaking States and Energy Charter Secretariat. The ECO Specialized Agencies/Regional Institutions/Affiliated Bodies and the representatives of the international organizations were present during the meeting. The delegation of the ECO Secretariat was led by the ECO Secretary General, Ambassador Halil Ibrahim Akca.



The Council of Ministers (COM) represents the highest decision making body of ECO and is composed of Ministers of Foreign Affairs of the Member states. The Council, meeting annually, is primarily responsible for formulating policies, strategies and work programmes of the Organization. It has also the responsibility of reviewing and adopting the reports of the Regional Planning Council, Council of Permanent Representatives and ECO Specialized Agencies/Regional Institutions/Affiliated Bodies.

Mr. Sartaj Aziz, Deputy Chairman, Planning Commission of Pakistan, inaugurated the COM as the outgoing chairman. In his opening remarks while welcoming the delegates he highlighted the importance of intensifying efforts for interconnectivity and trade for the regional development. Deputy Chairman touched upon the policy areas stated in the ECO Vision 2025 and the importance of meeting the timelines mentioned in the Implementation Framework of the Vision 2025. He also emphasized the significance of the ECOTA agreement for the region and urged the non-signatory members to sign it at the earliest. His Excellency also expressed their appreciation for the Secretariat's initiative to bring equality in the procedure of establishment of an affiliated body in different member states.

The 23<sup>rd</sup> meeting of the Council of Ministers marked the handing over of the Organization's chairmanship from the Islamic Republic of Pakistan to the Republic of Tajikistan for a period of one year. H.E. Mr. Sirodjidin Aslov, Foreign Minister of the Republic of Tajikistan, expressed his gratitude to the Council for reposing confidence on his election as the Chairman. He expressed that the main principles of the ECO Vision 2025 was in line with the 2030 Sustainable Development Goals and Tajikistan's national development strategies. Therefore, to get the benefit from it the ECO region should act together and find mechanisms for the effective implementation of it. He also highlighted the importance of regional cooperation for the peace and stability of Afghanistan and expressed their supports for the new ECO Advocacy Programme for Afghanistan.

H.E. Mr. Halil Ibrahim Akca briefed the meeting about the activities and developments within the Organization's framework. He urged the Member States to enhance their cooperation on trade, transport, energy and tourism sectors where the cooperation in these areas does live up to its potential. He laid particular stress on early implementation of the ECOTA. On the issue of Afghanistan, the Secretary General pointed out that Organization has been making contribution towards the nation's reconstruction through the Special Reconstruction Fund for Afghanistan and a new ECO Advocacy Programme for Afghanistan has been prepared by the Secretariat. He also pointed out that the necessity of the early implementation of the reform of the ECO for the efficiency of the organization.

During their deliberations, The Minister of Foreign Affairs and representatives of the Member States also reaffirmed their countries commitment and support to regional cooperation.

The COM reviewed the activities of the organization since the last COM and adopted the reports and approved the administrative matters. The COM also deliberated on the substantial issues that have significant impact for the regional development and proper functioning of the Organization. The new ECO Advocacy Programme for Afghanistan was adopted. The "Dushanbe Communiqué" including salient points of cooperation among the Members of ECO as a regional organization in charge of significant regional issues approved.