

Statement by Dr. Sayed Yahya Akhlaqi Deputy Secretary General of the Economic
Cooperation Organization
at 2020 SPECA Economic Forum
"Regional Cooperation to Support Socioeconomic Recovery in the Wake of Covid-19"

Honorable Chairman
Distinguished Participants
Ladies and Gentlemen,

I am privileged to attend this important event. Having been invited on 2020 SPECA Economic Forum, I would like to extend my sincere gratitude to the United Nations Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific (ESCAP), the United Nations Economic Commission for Europe (UNECE) and the Government of the Kyrgyz Republic as the present Chair of the United Nations Special Programme for the Economies of Central Asia (SPECA). I further appreciate the organizers who have made it convenient to organize this event under the theme of "Regional Cooperation to support socioeconomic recovery in the wake of COVID-19 pandemic, which is a global cause of concern.

I would also like to acknowledge the commendable contribution of the United Nations to foster and shoulder the process of socio-economic development and prosperity in the ECO Region.

Distinguished participants,

The initial reaction to the COVID-19 crisis by most countries was to look at the issue inwards and individually. As a result, global managing response to control the spread, mitigation and eradication of the pandemic remained below expectation. However, the obstinacy of the virus has, with the passage of time, made the world realize that only resorting a regionally consolidated and internationally integrated approach, having hand-in-hand with national capacity strength as well as boosting health systems, protecting incomes and minimizing economic constriction, can help address the challenges taking place due to the aggressive pandemic.

As one of the first regions to be affected by the outbreak, the ECO has witnessed a rapid increase in the number of confirmed cases. Domestic containment measures and global disruption to trade, tourism and production are pushing forward the region to prepare for the prospects of an economic slowdown. Similar to other regions, the public infrastructure in the ECO region was neither built nor prepared to cope with this kind of situation. The ongoing crisis continues to widen the existing socioeconomic and infrastructural disparities and inequities for the ECO region which is striving for economic development with its half a billion people.

The WTO estimates show that global merchandise trade is set to plummet between 12% to 32 % in 2020 and nearly all the regions will suffer double digit decline in trade volumes in 2020. To re-ignite the cycle of economic activity through allocation of easy financing packages for opening businesses, travel, trade and investment; the international and regional institutions can play important roles. Developing the healthcare and social protection systems need to be considered as an immediate task to mitigate social disparities. The challenges to trade facilitation and paperless trade need to be tackled with collaborative response. The increasing yet evolving role and

relevance of an integrative, universal digital transformation as an engine of future value has become a vital objective in the recovery period. The ECO secretariat has focused trade facilitation and paperless trade as an important component to enhance trade in the wake of Covid -19. Research studies have been launched on scoping of the NTBs to initiate actions to remove such barriers hindering trade and draft an agreement on Cross Border Trade Facilitation in the ECO Region. Likewise research studies have been launched on Regional Payment System in ECO to ensure swift clearance of payments in regional transactions through a paperless process. Taking into consideration that the absolute and comparative advantages of member states can be a very ideal tool in improving economic situation of ECO member states, the ECO Gate Project is defined with core issue of cross border transport and investment.

The COVID-19 crisis highlighted the criticality of digital transformation of business, industry and society. SPECA is such an important platform that could foster a closer and meaningful proactive collaboration among the international, regional, financial organizations and governments to join hands in our collective efforts in all these areas to save the people of the region from the potential negative effects of Covid-19 and its aftermaths.

In the context of the pandemic, let me underline that H.E Hadi Soleimanpour, the Secretary General of the ECO took liberty to write to the heads of several major international and regional financial institutions, including the World Bank, the Asian Development Bank, Asian Infrastructure Investment bank, EU Infrastructure Development Bank and Islamic Development Bank; seeking their collaborative engagements to support the ECO Region in its efforts to maintain access to finance ECO's projects in the ongoing era of crunch. Most of them welcomed the idea and introduced their focal points to find ways and means for joint operation and activities.

Dear Participants,

Considering the national and international experiences, this forum may suggest some mechanisms to facilitate mobilization of all our resources towards the cooperation for interventions in hard hit sectors, including healthcare, agriculture, trade, small and Medium scale manufacturing, services sector trade like travel, hospitality etc., and assist Member States in priority projects to re-invigorate economic cycles in the region.

To this end, I assure that ECO will continue to pursue with its partners to discuss and develop ideas for coordinated actions by Governments, United Nations system and other relevant stakeholders to respond to the socioeconomic impacts of COVID-19. The ECO Secretariat is always receptive for any possible joint efforts that could pave the way for a regional and global socioeconomic recovery. Moreover, the ECO would be supporting any decisions to strengthen its partnership with other stakeholders and implementation on the recommendations of this forum, countering the repercussions of this global pandemic for the collective betterment of our societies.

The ECO Secretariat, along with growing global concerns in view of the unyielding transmission of the pandemic and the associated/negative impacts on the socioeconomic activities and progress in the ECO Region; proposed the member states to work closely for establishing an all-inclusive consultative mechanism to address the following issues:

1. Enhancement of technical cooperation on communicable diseases particularly COVID-19 in close collaboration with the WHO and other relevant international organizations and Immediate coordinated health response to suppress the transmission and end the pandemic.
2. Scaling up health capacities for testing, tracing, quarantine, and treatment, while keeping the frontline healthcare workers and other first responder safe.
3. Accelerated regional access to treatment and prevention through steady assistance to all Member States on account of any medical requirements.
4. Sharing transparent, timely and accurate information, experiences, and best practices on COVID-19 and measures for prevention, detection, control, and response.
5. Strengthening community engagement and collaboration with non-state actors and private sector and improving preparedness for any future health emergencies.
6. Collective efforts, measures, or regulations, to facilitate smooth customs clearance for essential medical supplies and equipment through ECO borders

ECO secretariat has issued practical guidelines for Covid-19 that include:

- To use electronic solutions and procedures such as e-TIR and e-CMR instead of paper documents to expedite releases of trucks at borders and decrease risks of physical contacts among the people;
- To timely transmit to the ECO Secretariat their provisionally enforced regulatory and normative measures relating to application of procedures for vehicles, drivers and cargoes; and allow an unhindered passage for truck drivers and road trucks (loaded/unloaded). Such measure is especially critical as bans on freight transport adversely affect the lives of the people, bearing unnecessary delays and deterrence for mainstream flow of essential supplies like food and medication
- Truck drivers have to observe medical protocols on arrival at BCPs, they must have personal protective equipment (medical masks, gloves) on board and use them when they leave the cabin. Whereas further driving along the designated roads and transit corridors in the territory of ECO Member States may be tracked, using GPS tracking devices, till the final destination by local authorities thereby ensuring safety & security of the road transport workers.

In this regard, a Ministerial meeting on health is expected to be held in late November or early December 2020..

In line with the ECO Vision to improve economic situation in member states, ECO Gate project has been initiated. We strongly believe that this project will help members to utilize their resources especially in trade and transport systems.

The solution to the pandemic and effect and early socio-economic recovery to prevent job losses and economic hardships, lies in use of scientific processes and use of technology to conduct business and social and economic activities.

Before concluding, I would like to thank the esteemed UNECE and UNESCAP for holding this timely forum. I am sure that under the able guidance and cooperation of the distinguished representatives from international regional and financial

organizations, we will take effective steps and build strategies to collectively respond, mitigate and overcome the global socioeconomic challenges that popped up due to the COVID-19.

Thanks and best of luck.