

Draft Report
of the 31st Meeting of the
Council of Permanent Representatives of ECI (ECI-CPR)
(ECI Headquarters, 4 May 2020)

The Council of Permanent Representatives of ECO Cultural Institute (ECI) convened its 31st meeting at the ECO Headquarters on 4 May 2020 under the Chairmanship of H.E. Dr. Nizomiddin Zohidi, distinguished Ambassador of the Republic of Tajikistan. The Meeting was attended by the representatives of the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan, the Islamic Republic of Iran, the Islamic Republic of Pakistan, and the Republic of Tajikistan as well as a delegation of the ECO Cultural Institute. (List of Participants is enclosed as **Annex. I**).

Agenda item 1

Adoption of the Agenda

The draft agenda of the meeting which had been circulated among Member States vide Note No. ECI/524/108 dated 22 April 2020, was adopted unanimously as follows:

1. Adoption of the Agenda,
2. Consideration and adoption of the draft report of the previous ECI-CPR meeting,
3. Statement by ECI President on the ECI activities,
4. Budgetary issues:
 - Current Financial Situation of ECI
 - Consideration and Adoption of ECI's Draft Budget for the year 2020
5. Administrative matters:
 - Consideration of the possibility of holding online meetings of ECI-CPR
6. Any other Business,
7. Date and venue of the next meeting.

Agenda item 2

Consideration and adoption of the draft report of the previous ECI-CPR meeting

- The draft report of the 30th ECI-CPR meeting which had been circulated among the Member States vide Note No. ECI/524/726 dated November 3, 2019 was adopted.

Agenda item 3

Statement by ECI President

H.E. Sarvar Bakhti, ECI President made the following statement:

Mr. Chairman,

Honorable Ambassadors and Representatives of the ECO Member States ,

Ladies and Gentlemen ,

It is a distinct privilege to be on this forum. I am grateful to you for your kind participation in the 31st meeting of ECI-CPR amidst the Coronavirus outbreak. I would like to thank all of you, distinguished delegates and colleagues, for your cooperation and trust you have in me and my colleagues at the ECO Cultural Institute.

Excellencies,

I assumed my duties as the new President of the Institute in the last days of 2019 and since then, together with my team, we have made great effort to plan and organize successful programs.

First of all, I had the honor to pay a courtesy call on the distinguished Ambassadors of ECO member states in Iran. Also, I met with some cultural authorities of the Islamic Republic of Iran, to explore effective ways and channels of cooperation.

Our first event was a productive partnership between ECI and Iranian National Commission for UNESCO. It was a calligraphy exhibition in which 40 calligraphy works, written in Shekasteh Nastaliq (شکسته نستعلیق) script by outstanding artists, were on display.

In February, we organized the first exhibition of musical instruments from ECO countries titled 'Sazineh'. During the event, around 20 musical instruments from ECO countries were shown and played by the great instrumentalists .

To encourage the ECO member states to accede to ECI and increasing our member states, for the first time, we organized a joint event with the Embassy of Uzbekistan in Tehran. Attended by ambassadors and diplomatic officials of ECO countries, the photo exhibition 'Uzbekistan at the Crossroads of Silk Road' was held on February 17, 2020, at the ECI art gallery. In this regard, we have also planned joint cultural events together with the Republic of Azerbaijan and the Republic of Kazakhstan which have been postponed owing to Coronavirus pandemic. It is to be noted that the total expenses of the said events will be borne by the concerned country .

Furthermore, ECI has launched an innovative initiation by introducing the books published about ECO region and its member states. In this respect, a series of meetings has been arranged to provide an opportunity for the publishers and authors of such books to introduce their works to the audience attending the event.

Excellencies,

Regarding our plans for the future, our top priority is organizing joint events with the interested concerned authorities of the esteemed member states. We have had valuable experiences of such mutual collaboration in the past. Some examples are: holding the 4th meeting of the Heads of National libraries of the ECO member states in cooperation with the National Library of Tajikistan (Dushanbe, 2017), organizing "Khodawandgar-E-Balkh" International Symposium in cooperation

with the Ministry of Information and Culture of Afghanistan (2015) and Commemoration Conference in Allama Iqbal Lahore in collaboration with Dabistan-e Iqbal (Tehran, 2015). Another important priority of ECI for the years ahead will be strengthening the cooperation between the Institute and ECO Secretariat as well as the other specialized agencies of the organization to accomplish the objectives enshrined in the Treaty of Izmir and envisioned goals under the ECO Vision 2025.

Also, as we are mandated by our Charter, we are planning to publish selected works of the eminent writers of the member states. Further details will be communicated to the esteemed member states. In this respect, publication of a book on the theme of " Mother in the Poetry of the ECO Region" is on our agenda. Also, two volumes on proverbs and short stories from ECO region will be published.

Moreover, ECI, as always, will have the honor to commemorate cultural figures of the member states. some of such kind of programs are mentioned in our calendar of events at the end of the proposed budget's document .

And finally, we declare that we attach a great importance to sport. Thus, ECI will be holding a sports competition for the diplomats of the ECO member states based in Tehran and a regional ECO cup to be participated by competitors from across the region subject to availability of funds . It should be noted that a futsal tournament for the students from the ECO member states who are studying in Iran was planned to be jointly held by ECI and Islamic Republic of Iran Broadcasting, but the project was postponed due to Coronavirus pandemic .

Ladies and Gentlemen,

As you see in our budget document, we have planned a wide range of activities to be implemented in the year 2020, but the outbreak of Coronavirus has been imposing a strict limit on them and we had to cancel or postpone them until further notice .

For instance, ECI and the esteemed Embassy of Afghanistan in Tehran were going to hold "Herat Night" in February, but we had to cancel the event at the last moment .

The other example is Nourouz celebration which was planned to be jointly held by ECI and the embassies of ECO Member States in Tehran in partnership with Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Islamic Republic of Iran and Iranian National Commission for UNESCO.

Another event is the 5th meeting of the Heads of National libraries of the ECO member states. In this regard, we had started negotiations with the Republic of Kazakhstan and the Republic of Turkey for hosting the event but we had to halt the talks.

Besides, we and the authorities of Iran's National Library and Archive have started examining the possibility of organizing the first meeting of heads of archives of the ECO member states.

Also, we can refer to another important event, titled ""First ECO University Rectors' Symposium for the Development of Academic and Cultural Cooperation in the ECO Region " which has been planned to be jointly held by ECI, Islamic Culture and Relations Organization Allameh Tabataba'i University and ECO College of Insurance.

Moreover, an event to pay tribute to Khajeh Nassir Toosi, a renowned Persian philosopher was scheduled to be jointly held by ECI and Khajeh Nassir Toosi University in late February but it did not take place as well .

Despite of all mentioned above, we are planning to hold some of our activities virtually and publish them on our social media pages. Our first virtual program will be an online gallery of calligraphy artworks by a prominent Afghan calligraphy master on the occasion of the holy month of Ramadan. Anyway, we will be ready to organize more activities when life returns to normalcy .

Also, we would like to welcome the proposal made by the distinguished Representative of the Islamic Republic of Iran, which was raised during the meeting with him recently for joint cultural projects involving actors from the member states, for instance: joint film projects. To this end, we would like to have the consent of ECI-CPR for developing such projects. Further details and progress reports will be conveyed in due course.

Another issue which has been endorsed by the 30th meeting of the ECO Regional Planning Council (14-16 January 2020), is organizing the 7th meeting of the Institute's Board of Trustees which is scheduled to be held in 2020 in Pakistan. We understand the current health situation but still looking forward to hearing from distinguished Pakistani authorities about the date of the event, of course after eradication of Corona disease. In the meantime, we are working on the draft agenda and the issues to be discussed at the meeting .

One of such issues could be removal of anomalies in the basic documents of ECI. The issue has been approved at the 20th Meeting of the ECI-CPR (27 September 2015) but has not been followed up to date. The issue will be included in the agenda of ECI-CPR in the near future for further details and deliberation .

Ladies and Gentlemen ,

Regarding our current financial situation, it should be noted that the incumbent President took over the Institute while the accounts balance was only 825 USD and the Institute was more than 183,000 USD in debt to its staff for their overdue salary. Afghanistan Desk Officer had not been paid for two consecutive years. Also, Cultural Expert from Iran and Tajikistan Desk Officer had not received their salary for one whole year. Furthermore, annual increment in salary of the local staff had not been paid for several months. We have cleared only 60,000 USD of the debts. We still have to pay more than 123,000 USD to our personnel. In this regard, we are planning to pay the unsettled amount to our staff after the receipt of the outstanding arrears of the distinguished member states. Depending on the contributions we receive, we will be able to pay our staff the full overdue amount or in few installments.

Excellencies,

For years, our local staff had been receiving their emoluments in Iranian Rial with very low pay, which was due to inadequate budget, but now we are exploring the possibility of paying the salary of local staff in US Dollar as sanctioned in our Staff rules and regulations. Certainly, it would be subject to the availability of funds which are provided by the member states through the payment of their annual contributions .

Also, a table regarding the latest payments of the esteemed member states is before you and our Accounts Officer will brief the Council on further details later at this meeting. Our records indicate that the Institute used to receive voluntary contribution from the Islamic Republic of Iran for a very long time. I would like to request the esteemed representative of the Islamic Republic of Iran to kindly bring the issue to the notice of the concerned authorities that the Institute is in need of special assistance.

Distinguished delegates,

The most important issue to be discussed today is the ECI's proposed budget for the year 2020. As previously explained in relevant Notes Verbale circulated among the distinguished member states, the delay in preparation and circulation of the budget was due to the recent presidential transition in ECI. I would like to reiterate that ECI, on the base of thrift, has shrunk its expenditures to the maximum extent possible in all heads of the proposed budget, which led to a decrease of 31 percent

in comparison with the budget for the previous year. Also, we are pleased to assure that this proposed budget has been prepared with absolute clarity to avoid ambiguities and misunderstandings .

With respect to the budget deficit, although we would endeavor to procure the amount from cultural donations made to the Institute, but it's not a stable financial source to depend on. Therefore, we hope that it would be financed by the settlement of the outstanding arrears of the esteemed member states.

In this regard, I would like to extend my sincere gratitude to the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan for payment of its annual contribution for the years 2018 and 2019 and the Islamic Republic of Iran for the year 2019. It should be noted that the annual contribution of the Republic of Tajikistan for the year 2019 was received before the end of the year and we appreciate it. I would like to request the other member states to kindly expedite the payment of their arrears.

Nevertheless, we are grateful to the Islamic Republic of Iran and the Republic of Tajikistan for the adoption of the proposed budget. I hope the remaining member states help this Council today to reach the required unanimity for the adoption of the proposed budget.

Excellencies,

Once again, I would like to express my gratitude to you for taking part in this meeting and I trust that with your support and contribution, we will be able to take a great leap forward in the promotion of the cultural heritage of the region and enhancement of the cultural exchanges among the member states .

Thank you.

Agenda item 4

Budgetary matters:

- Current Financial Situation of ECI

Representative of the Islamic Republic of Iran: congratulated ECI President on assumption of his post and assured that the President of ECI will receive the full support of the host country during his tenure of office.

He added that the Islamic Republic of Iran agrees with the ECI's proposed budget for the year 2020 and it's unfortunate to hear about the unpaid salary of the ECI staff. He declared that the outstanding arrears of the member states is around 900,000 USD and the overdue salary of the ECI staff is almost one tenth of the said amount. It is the responsibility of the member states to pay their contribution in due time. This large amount of arrears will impact daily activities of the Institute. However, all the cultural activities/programs conducted by the Institute, have enjoyed complete support of the Islamic Republic of Iran as the host country. Anyway, there is an imbalance between the total due annual contribution of the member states and the total budget proposed by the Institute, although it has been mentioned that the budget deficit will be recovered by receipt of the outstanding arrears of the member states.

He emphasized that once for all a solution should be found for the problem of the outstanding arrears which have been accumulated over several years. Of course, timely payment of annual contributions will help smooth functioning of the Institute.

Regarding the outstanding arrears of the Republic of Tajikistan, the Chairman (Ambassador of Tajikistan) briefed the council that the arrears are related to a period of 6 years in which the

Republic of Tajikistan was neither much involved in the activities of ECI, nor was represented in the Institute. Other than that, every year Tajikistan has regularly paid its annual contribution to ECI. He stressed that the problem of the outstanding arrears of the member states of ECI should be solved. A separate official/unofficial meeting should be held by the member states to come up with a solution.

Representative of the Islamic Republic of Pakistan: explained that due to some internal reshuffling in the concerned ministries of Pakistan, the payments of the member state to ECI is pending. He further noted that the outstanding arrears of Pakistan has been accumulated owing to difficulties in transferring funds. The embassy of Pakistan, Ambassador in particular, is pursuing the issue until it is processed.

- Consideration and Adoption of ECI's Draft Budget for the year 2020

Representative of the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan: announced that the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan agrees with the ECI's proposed budget for the year 2020 and the official approval of the member state will be communicated to ECI within the current week.

Representative of the Islamic Republic of Pakistan: informed that the Islamic Republic of Pakistan agrees in principle with the proposed the ECI's proposed budget for the year 2020 and the relevant document has been forwarded to the concerned ministry and soon the approval will be conveyed.

Representative of the Islamic Republic of Iran: referred to the proposal for payment of salary to local staff of the Institute in USD which was already raised during the statement of the ECI President and clarified that it is against the laws of the host country. Therefore, this proposal is not accepted. Due to financial difficulties encountered by the Institute which has forced the Institute to terminate the service of 7 members of its staff, as mentioned in the proposed budget.

He noted that ECI must provide the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Islamic Republic of Iran as the host country with its local staff strength. It has been requested many times in the past.

He asserted that according to the charter of the Institute, all assignments in ECI, whether official or local, require the consent of the government of the concerned staff.

He also requested the Institute to reconsider the dismissal of its 7 members of staff because being jobless will badly affect their family life.

President of ECI: referred to the report of the 25th meeting of ECI-CPR and noted that it has been a practice in the past that in the absence of Board of Trustees of ECI, the proposed budget shall be adopted by the Council of Permanent Representatives. In this regard, ECI kindly requests the adoption of the proposed budget for the year 2020 by the ECI-CPR.

The Council adopted the ECI's proposed budget for the year 2020 by silence procedure providing that no objection is raised by the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan and the Islamic Republic of Pakistan within 20 working days from the date of the current ECI-CPR meeting.

Agenda item 5

Administrative matters:

- Consideration of the possibility of holding online meetings of ECI-CPR

President of ECI informed the Council that hopefully the Coronavirus will be exterminated in the months ahead but some specialists believe that another wave of coronavirus will likely hit the world in the fall. So, we would like to seek the approval of ECI- CPR for holding meetings online until further notice.

Representative of the Islamic Republic of Iran: stated that ECI has precisely observed health protocols and provided proper facilities for holding the ongoing ECI-CPR meeting. Thus, physical meetings will be much better than the virtual ones which do not evoke the true sense of dialog among the member states. He further noted that ECI-CPR should convene every month on a regular basis. The activities of the Institute must be discussed by the member states at ECI-CPR meetings, and authorization of the Council must be sought before organizing them.

The Chairman supported the proposal of Representative of the Islamic Republic of Iran for holding monthly meetings of ECI-CPR. He expressed hope that the health situation will be better in the months ahead and the Council will be convening physical meetings.

Representative of the Islamic Republic of Pakistan: proposed that the Council may hold a combination of virtual and physical meetings. There could be a short virtual meeting to deliberate on a brief agenda and a physical meeting which will be held regularly and attended by the member states for discussing the relevant details.

Agenda item 6

Any other business

Regarding the 7th meeting of the Institute's Board of Trustees which was raised in the statement of ECI President, Representative of the Islamic Republic of Pakistan informed that the issue is being followed up with the relevant Ministry of Pakistan and the related details will be conveyed in the near future.

Agenda item 7

Date and venue of the next meeting

Upon the proposal by the Chairman, the Council left the date and the manner of holding the next meeting to the ECI President's discretion after consultation with the Chairman.

Annex-I

**The 31st Meeting of the
ECI Council of Permanent Representatives (CPR)**

List of Participants

Embassy of the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan:

- Mr. Lutfullah Khepulwak, Fist Secretary

Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Islamic Republic of Iran:

- H.E. Ambassador Majid Bizmark, Director General, Multilateral and International Economic Cooperation
- Mr. Ghaderi, Expert, ECO Affairs Bureau, MFA

Embassy of the Islamic Republic of Pakistan:

- Mr. Mohsin Saifullah, Second Secretary

Embassy of the Republic of Tajikistan:

- H.E. Dr. Nizomiddin Zohidi, Ambassador
- Mr. Mirzosharif Kabirov, Third Secretary

ECO Cultural Institute:

- H.E. Sarvar Bakhti, President
- Ms. Mirbagheri, External Relations
- Mr. Sayed Javad Mirkazemian, Accounts Officer
- Mr. Shah Mansur Khojeov, Tajikistan's Desk Officer
- Ms. Masuma Nazari, Afghanistan's Desk Officer
- Mr. Mehdi Omraninejad, Expert
- Ms. Nastaran Nosratzadegan, Interpreter