

Opening Remarks

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**Third Customs Cooperation Committee Meeting
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Baku, Azerbaijan**

Thank you, Mr. Heydarov for the warm welcome.

Distinguished Members of the Customs Cooperation Committee, Country Delegates,
Resource Persons,
Ladies and Gentlemen,

It is my great honor and pleasure to join Mr. Heydarov in welcoming you and opening the third meeting of the Customs Cooperation Committee (CCC). On behalf of the Asian Development Bank (ADB) and distinguished delegates, I would like to thank the State Customs Committee of Azerbaijan for hosting this event, and for the warm hospitality and excellent arrangements that the Azerbaijan Customs has provided us. This will undoubtedly contribute to a more cooperative and friendly atmosphere for your deliberations in the coming days. I would also like to thank the Azerbaijan Customs for its contribution to the program and for proposing to develop a "Common Training Program" as an important initiative.

We are honored that all member country delegations are led by the heads or deputy heads of customs administrations. This high-level participation highlights your respective country's ownership and shared commitment to the Regional Trade Facilitation and Customs Cooperation Program. Your active engagement in the Program is vital for its success. For this purpose, the country delegates in all previous events stressed the importance of the annual CCC Meeting to ensure senior management commitment and guidance to the Program. Indeed, it is your leadership, your vision, your commitment, and your collective efforts that will ultimately drive the success and sustainability of the Program. The ADB and other development institutions are committed to support you and facilitate your cooperation.

Since the second meeting of the CCC in Tashkent in October 2003, substantive progress has been made in implementing the seven-point Common Action Plan endorsed by the CCC, particularly in (i) promotion of bilateral customs cooperation (ii) training and knowledge sharing, and (iii) support for individual member countries' customs reforms and modernization initiatives. As a result, your program has been increasingly recognized as a flagship program in the Region and the international development community. I would like to thank the working groups and expert groups for taking a pragmatic and result-oriented approach in advancing the cooperation agenda. Like all the previous regional events, the Third CCC Meeting again provides a venue for the member countries to strengthen their bilateral relationship, as shown by Azerbaijan and the Kyrgyz Republic signing a custom agreement during the Meeting and PRC and Uzbekistan firming up the schedule to enter into an Agreement on Mutual Administrative Assistance expected to be signed in 2005.

Ladies and Gentlemen, there are two important items for this CCC Meeting: (i) the consideration of the work plans to be developed by the two working groups chaired by the People's Republic of China and Uzbekistan, and (ii) your consideration and endorsement of a Joint Statement to provide guidance on future directions and priorities. In particular, we look to the CCC for guidance on (i) how to broaden and deepen the regional trade facilitation agenda and (ii) how to strengthen the working arrangements and find ways to work more productively together. The role of the Working Group Chairs is crucial in carrying out the work plans endorsed by the CCC. Therefore, we hope that this CCC Meeting will produce concrete guidance and measures to ensure the initiation and organization of the annual Working Group meeting(s) and their timely reporting to the CCC. We should also capitalize on the strengthened friendship and mutual understanding achieved through the Program, and introduce initiatives that will broaden and deepen the trade facilitation agenda. Measures to monitor the progress and results achieved by the working groups and expert groups should also be considered.

Distinguished country delegates, ladies and gentlemen, once again, the sustainability and the future of the Program are very much in your hands. We at ADB, as the secretariat, will do our best to facilitate and provide necessary technical and financial resources for your undertakings. We support your cooperative initiatives under this program, and equally important, we also provide substantial technical and financial assistance to support individual member countries' customs reforms and modernization efforts as shown by the recent loans and technical assistance for the Kyrgyz Republic and Tajikistan. We are pleased to inform you that a new technical assistance in the amount of \$900,000 is likely to be approved by ADB Management soon to support initiatives and work plans endorsed at this CCC Meeting

Ladies and Gentlemen. We have come a long way just two years into our Program. Nevertheless, I am confident that two years from now this Third CCC Meeting will be remembered as a turning point for this group of countries to promote trade facilitation on a much broader front and in a major scale. It will make us even more proud of ourselves to be a partner—serving as your secretariat for your collective endeavor.

I wish you success in your deliberations.

Thank you.