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**Statement by Mr. M.J. Akbar, Minister of State for External Affairs**

**Government of Republic of India**

**at RECCA VII Conference**

*(November 15, 2017; Ashgabat, Turkmenistan)*

Excellency Deputy Prime Minister and Foreign Minister Meredov,  
Excellency Foreign Minister Rabbani,  
Distinguished Guests,  
Ladies and Gentlemen,

I would like to begin with profuse thanks to our Turkmen and Afghan friends for their excellent organisation and generous hospitality. It is, hence, both a pleasure and a privilege to lead my country's delegation to the RECCA VII Conference in this beautiful and historic city of Ashgabat.

Friends,

RECCA was initiated in 2005 to support the peace process in Afghanistan and build greater stability through economic co-operation in South, West and Central Asian regions. Even a casual assessment suggests that RECCA has been able to make appreciable gains towards stated goals, creating fiscal and economic bridges between Afghanistan and its near and wider regions.

For India, RECCA is vital because, as a powerful engine for economic growth, it shapes the aspirations of the young. If we do not offer economic empowerment to the young, their faith in future will ebb. We are deeply committed to the RECCA process. We believe in both bilateral and multilateral mechanisms to help the Afghan economy.

We had the honor to host the third Conference of RECCA in November 2006 in India. But despite some visible and tangible improvements, Afghanistan continues to face a multitude of challenges, from extreme terrorism, low investment, blocked or interrupted connectivity and fluctuating institutional capacity. A friend in need is a friend indeed, as the proverb goes; this is the moment for friends of Afghanistan to enhance their act. India has worked with belief, confidence and imagination. The thrust of our efforts has been on capacity building, human resource development, infrastructure, connectivity, trade and investment.

India's overall developmental assistance to Afghanistan since 2001 has amounted to over US\$ 2 billion. In September 2016, India pledged another US\$ 1 billion assistance to Afghanistan. This was followed by unveiling of the 'New Development Partnership' between Afghanistan and India in 2017, to focus on priorities as identified by the Government and people of Afghanistan. India has already announced 116 new 'High Impact Community Development Projects' and several large scale projects such as *Shahtoot* dam and drinking water for Kabul city, and low-cost housing for returning Afghan refugees. India's new assistance projects will be implemented across all 34 provinces of Afghanistan.

A key priority for India is building robust, reliable and year round connectivity for Afghanistan. We assert that lack of connectivity directly impacts the economic, security and political stability in Afghanistan. The trilateral transit and transport agreement via Chabahar between India, Iran and Afghanistan in May 2016 was a milestone. A fortnight ago, on November 1, 2017, the first ship carrying Indian wheat grain assistance to Afghanistan reached Chabahar from where it was taken overland to Afghanistan. It is the beginning of a new era of enhanced connectivity for Afghanistan, West Asia and beyond to the larger Eurasian regions.

Another major milestone was the India-Afghanistan Air Freight Corridor, which began operations in June 2017. Already, over 3 dozen cargo flights have reached New Delhi from Kabul and Kandahar, bringing Afghanistan's new harvest produce to Indian consumers within a matter of hours. The speed with which the air corridor was established is evidence of its necessity; it was first discussed by the leaders of our two countries only in September last year. We must ask a question: why did Afghanistan and India need an air corridor when there has been road connectivity between the two nations since time immemorial? Our common, stated objective is expansion of existing routes, even as we seek to create new ones, improving the economic integration of Afghanistan both towards Central and South Asia. India has always conveyed its readiness to receive export laden Afghan trucks at its Integrated Check Point at Attari on the India-Pakistan border. However, Pakistan has regrettably chosen to block normal access between India and Afghanistan. In effect, Pakistan has emerged as the largest wall in history, inhibiting connectivity between India and Afghanistan. This blockade is a crime against the people of Afghanistan; for it is their welfare which is affected the most.

India recently organised the India-Afghanistan Trade and Investment Show in September 2017 in New Delhi. It gives us great pleasure to inform this high level meeting that nearly US\$ 250 million worth of deals were discussed between businessmen and entrepreneurs of the two countries, and several were finalised. Encouraged, we shall hold the next such business event in the very near future.

We also strongly support various other ongoing international efforts towards better connectivity for Afghanistan, like the International North South Transit Corridor, Ashgabat Agreement, Lapis-Lazuli Transit, Trade & Transport Route, Turkmenistan-Afghanistan Pakistan India (TAPI) pipeline, Central Asia – South Asia (CASA) 1000, Turkmenistan-Afghanistan-Tajikistan (TAT) railway line and the Five Nations Railway line. Likewise, India is also proud to be the Lead Country for the Confidence Building

Measure of the Heart of Asia – Istanbul Process for Trade, Commerce & Investment Opportunities.

At this juncture I also wish to emphasize that the pursuit of transnational projects must accord due consideration to concerns nations may have on issues of sovereignty and territorial integrity.

Friends,

RECCA should not be seen in isolation from other regional organisations and initiatives, chief amongst them being the Heart of Asia - Istanbul Process. Since its inception in 2011, Heart of Asia has been this has remained the most powerful assertion of international concern for the economic progress and political stability of Afghanistan, thanks to its wide membership and scope of activities. RECCA and Heart of Asia complement each other. Our efforts should be directed towards harmony between RECCA and Heart of Asia. I am glad to learn that this synergy has the support of the wider RECCA membership.

Friends,

On behalf of my delegation, I wish the Conference all success. Thank You.

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