Keynote address by Dr. Kunio Mikuriya, WCO Secretary General

43rd Enforcement Committee Meeting

27 March 2023

Dear delegates, participants,
Ladies and gentlemen,

I would like to warmly welcome all of you to the WCO Enforcement Committee.

This 43rd session is special in two ways: first, after several years of virtual and hybrid work, we are back on track with in-person meetings, even though some flexibility for the passive virtual participation remains. Second, this year we are celebrating the 40th anniversary of the Enforcement Committee since its establishment in 1983. This year the WCO is celebrating its 70th anniversary and the fact that the Customs enforcement activities increased its significance over the first 30 years that led to the creation of the EC 40 years ago is extraordinary.

Let us zoom out from the current session and look into the evolution of the EC over the past years. I would like to compare the current EC session with that of 17th and 18th sessions in 1998 and 1999, the oldest reports that we have access through the current WCO website and incidentally I was present at both sessions as a delegate like you. We could see the evolution of focus and approach of enforcement activities in the past 25 years, perhaps representing the similar trend over the past 40 years, and I would like to summarize the progress in five points.
First, the scope. While the underlying fraudulent and criminal activities remain comparable, the emphasis in 1997 was transnational organized crime. The focus has been subsequently broadened to a supply chain security in general, covering a wide range of areas, including emerging threats at the global level, to protect society and citizens that you see in the EC agenda in front of you. For example, Greening Customs and supply chains, including the implementation of the Multilateral Environment Agreements related to hazardous wastes, is one of focus areas of the current Strategic Plan. This shows Customs responsiveness in contributing to the global agenda of sustainable development goals. In response to the border situation in some countries, addressing Fragile Borders and Conflict-Affected Situation is another example of agile and responsive actions of the global Customs community.

Second, the use of technology. Needless to say, this is another focus area of the ongoing Strategic Plan. The first strategic item on the agenda today is Customs Enforcement Network, the use of technology in collecting seizure data, but its history is relatively young. It was at the 18th session of the EC in 1999 that Members discussed and agreed on the launch of the CEN that grew to the current stage with more software development. With the adoption of the Data Strategy at the Council sessions last June, the Data and Statistics Working Group has been working on standardization of the enforcement data that will further support the development of CEN, together with enhanced digitalization and interoperability. The WCO has continued to explore the potential of technology in the enforcement area, including geoportal in the Colibri Program as part of countering drug trafficking and Geo intelligence in the Fragile Borders, or tracking and inspection technologies employed in the Tin Can operations as part of countering transnational organized crime and its supply chain infiltration, to name a few.

Third, conduct of operations. In 1998 or 1999 the sessions were filled with Members presentations of their national operations, which provided basis for information exchange and sharing intelligence and best practices. In response to Members’ desire to operationalize its enforcement programs, however, the WCO has increasingly mobilized its resources in organizing and coordinating operations over the past 15 years, to raise visibility of Customs contributions in protecting society at
borders and provide capacity building to Customs officers. This change requires human and financial resources, and consequently, the WCO donor funding and the number of staff have grown considerably. How to address this growing need is one of the major topics being discussed under the WCO Modernization Plan, another focus area in the Strategic Plan.

Fourth, intelligence and risk management. 25 years ago, the analysis of Customs seizure data relied on the reports from RILOs and Members’ inputs, usually in the form of their presentations at the EC sessions. Now, we use the CEN system to collect Members’ seizure records and outcomes of WCO operations, supplemented by open source data to analyze the global and regional trends of illicit trade and share the analysis. The Illicit Trade Report published last year incorporated this mixed methodology, and recently it has been applied to commercial fraud in a more comprehensive manner that you could see in the TRENDS POTTER report. Similarly, improving data analysis for risk management is one of the key deliverables of our activities and the updated Risk Management Compendium is another noteworthy product, grown from the theoretical to operational tool.

Fifth, cooperation with international organizations and other partners. The major agenda 25 years ago in this respect was concluding MOUs to build trust. Nowadays, we coordinate and work together with our partners in sharing information, conducting operations, training, networking and using technology towards the common goal while recognizing each other’s competence and membership. The Policy Commission last December recommended that the WCO continues to strengthen cooperation and enhances strategic communication of Customs contribution in this respect.

In all five areas, we achieved much in the past 40 years, thanks to your support. Of course, we need your continuous support in these areas, in terms of your inputs in identifying the focus areas, sharing best practices in technology, providing human and financial resources in operations to encourage cooperation, collecting and
analyzing data to produce good intelligence and promote communication in strengthening cooperation with our partners.

In line with the theme of this year, “Nurturing the next generation by promoting culture of knowledge-sharing and professional price in Customs”, let us continue renewing and sharing knowledge of our enforcement and compliance activities to protect society and remain proud of our success and future. And with Members’ active supports and contributions, the WCO wishes to remain agile, responsive and relevant in the coming another 70 years.

Thank you.