Excellency Secretary-General, Mr. Zurab Pololikashvili,
Members of the Commission for East Asia and the Pacific and Commission for South Asia, dear colleagues and friends,

First of all, I would like to take this opportunity to extend my warm wishes to you with the hope that you and your loved ones remain in good health and high spirits. It gives me great pleasure to chair the 33rd CAP-CSA Joint Meeting, even as we are compelled to convene virtually once again against the backdrop of an evolving pandemic in the Asia-Pacific region.

Since our first virtual meeting over a year ago, undeniably, it has remained challenging for countries in the region with resurgences and outbreaks of new variants. Nevertheless, we remain optimistic for the near future as most countries have implemented short term and long-term mitigating programmes which contribute to the prospect of recovery for the travel and tourism industries.

Currently, according to the latest July 2021 edition of the UNWTO’s World Tourism Barometer, Asia and the Pacific continued to suffer the largest decline in international arrivals with a 95% drop in the first five months of 2021 compared to the same period in 2019. As of June 2021, Asia-Pacific also recorded the largest number of destinations closed for international tourism, with a total of 32 or 70% of all destinations in the region.

Notwithstanding the near-standstill levels for both international and domestic tourism which continue to persist, we remain hopeful for positive developments ahead as considerable vaccination progress is gained. We are also encouraged by emerging travel innovations and novel solutions supporting a gradual shift from the “zero-COVID” approach towards an
endemic strategy which allows easing of restrictions for vaccinated travellers from low-risk countries once vaccination rates reach an acceptable threshold.

For instance, the phased reopening of island destinations and travel corridor arrangements initiated in the region have prompted others to emulate these examples, which may serve as a stepping stone towards a full reopening when conditions permit. I believe this demonstrates the importance of a cautious and responsible approach towards tourism recovery as an ongoing process to ensure that countries in the region can remain open for tourism with the appropriate risk management measures in place, as a vital lifeline for economic growth.

Towards this end, Malaysia has established a four-tier National Recovery Plan and three-phase Tourism Recovery Plan with measures in support of pandemic preparedness and destination readiness in its popular island destinations of Langkawi, Redang, Perhentian, Pangkor and Tioman as a start. Among the initiatives being introduced on a pilot basis include the acceleration of vaccinations for the local population and tourism workforce, safe travel campaigns to boost the confidence of travellers, and training and certification programmes to help equip local tourism service providers.

As Malaysia, alongside its regional counterparts work towards a gradual revival of international tourism, I would like to take this opportunity to acknowledge the strong leadership and continued support of the UNWTO in advancing recovery efforts through various initiatives such as:

- Coordination of the Global Tourism Crisis Committee (GTCC) and GTCC Technical Committee;
- Recommendations to Safely Restart Tourism;
- UNWTO Destination Tracker and Recovery Tracker;
- Launch of the UNWTO Best Tourism Villages Initiative; and
- Establishment of the Committee for the International Code for the Protection of Tourists (ICPT).
Malaysia believes that the continued work of the ICPT Committee, in particular, which member states in this region have had the opportunity to be actively involved in, would serve as an important guidance for governments and the industry in addressing the pain points of post-pandemic travel, particularly in terms of providing information, assistance, repatriation and contractual obligations for the protection of stranded tourists during emergency situations.

I would like express my sincere thanks to the Secretary-General of UNWTO, H.E. Mr. Zurab Pololikashvili and his team for their tremendous efforts towards building consensus among member states across all regions as a testament of the strength of multilateral cooperation and international solidarity among countries during these challenging times.

We are also grateful for the opportunity to connect virtually with Members of the Commissions more than ever before with the hope that our efforts will go a long way to gradually restore tourism performance in the Asia-Pacific region. With that said, let us come together to rebuild tourism into a more resilient and stronger industry.

Thank you.

H.E. Datuk Wira Dr. Noor Zari bin Hamat
Secretary-General
Ministry of Tourism, Arts and Culture Malaysia