Distinguished guests, ladies and gentlemen,

It is with great pleasure that I welcome all of you, and particularly those speakers and participants from abroad, to this important Conference.

I would like first of all to congratulate the “Mediterranean Flight Safety Foundation” for organizing this important event and indeed its substantial contribution to flight safety in Cyprus and the Mediterranean region. It is for this reason that the Government is supporting the Foundation and will continue to do so, since we consider that Non-Governmental Organisations can play an important role and compliment the Government efforts, especially in highly technical matters as aviation and flight safety.

In addition to allowing discussion and exchange of ideas on important matters, events like this contribute effectively to the development of regional cooperation . This is very important, since it is generally considered that cooperation is the key to the future development of aviation. After all, air travel is by its nature a transnational and interregional activity.

This cooperation becomes even more important, since we live in a very volatile and politically unstable region. It is for this reason that my Government attaches great importance to the development of good relations with all our neighbors. We are convinced that Cyprus, as the only country in the region that is a Member of the European Union and EUROCONTROL, can potentially play a leading role in enhancing cooperation and facilitate the adoption of common standards.

It is in this spirit of cooperation, that Cyprus with three more countries Greece, Italy and Malta created BLUE MED FAB one of the leading European Functional Airspace Blocks initiative. The State Level Agreement was signed by the Air Transport Ministers of the Member States in October 2012 in Limassol and since then the FAB has started its real life by producing tangible results for the realization of the Single European Sky to this particular part of our Continent, the Eastern Mediterranean Area. Our cooperation is based on trust and mutual respect and always is exercised through consensus. Due to its vast size, complexity and geographical location, being at the crossroads of three continents, BLUE MED has the unique potential to extend the application of the Single European Sky to non-EU partners aiming for a safer, efficient and seamless air traffic operation.

I note with great satisfaction that this Conference is coorganised by the Mediterranean Flight Safety Foundation, based in Cyprus, and the FISHER INSTITUTE of Israel and is supported by the respective Civil Aviation Authorities of the two countries. I consider this as yet another manifestation of the excellent relations between Cyprus and Israel in the fields of aviation, energy and search and rescue. These relations become even more important, given the activities of gas exploration in the exclusive economic zones of the two countries.

Our efforts in developing regional cooperation, are not confined to Israel alone, but extend to the other countries of the region. There have been already several tripartite meetings with Greece, Egypt and Jordan.

Let me now refer briefly to civil aviation and search and rescue in Cyprus.

Following the Turkish invasion in 1974, along with the devastation of practically all sectors of the economy, civil aviation suffered a total destruction. Despite this, we have managed to gradually rebuild our infrastructure and today civil aviation in Cyprus is comparable with that of any other European country. Air traffic in the Nicosia FIR, was in 2015 more than 320,000 flights, which were managed safely due to the modern technological infrastructure and the competency and professionalism of our air traffic controllers.

These high standards of service will be further enhanced, by the creation of an independent State Company which will have more flexibility and effectiveness in procedures and decision making .The process is at its final stages and hopefully by the end of this year the new company will be in operation. In addition, the regulatory part of the Department of Civil Aviation is restructured and will evolve into a state owned agency with greater autonomy, so that it can perform its functions in a more effective way.

Furthermore, Cyprus has two modern airports that offer excellent facilities to the airlines using it. As regards the airline industry, and despite the closure of Cyprus Airways, several new airline companies are seeking to be registered in Cyprus and have our country as a base of their operations. This is of great importance to the development of the air connectivity of Cyprus for the millions of visitors and consequently the development of our tourist sector which is the backbone of our economic development.

I am obliged however to mention, that the development of aviation and the enhancement of flight safety in Cyprus, is hindered by the existence of the illegal airport in the occupied areas of Cyprus and the interventions of the so called ”Ercan” station, in the provision of air traffic control in Nicosia FIR, which has been condemned by the International Civil Aviation Organization. This anomaly, coupled with the frequent interference of unauthorized and uncoordinated military flights from Turkey, crates certain dangers to aviation. These dangers are also recognized by the EU and ICAO. Certain efforts to mitigate the dangers have not succeeded due to unreasonable demands of Turkey. From our part, we shall continue to do anything possible to enhance safety, always based on international law and the provisions of the ICAO Convention.

As regards the Search and Rescue Centre of Cyprus, this is manifestly one of the best in the Mediterranean region. With its modern infrastructure and dedicated personnel, it has saved a great number of human lives. I have no doubt that it will continue to do so and be able to meet the new challenges when the gas exploration activities begin in the exclusive economic zone of Cyprus and the neighboring countries. We, as Government, shall give them all the required support.

Dear friends, let me conclude by saying that everybody involved in civil aviation has a very important role to play. But those involved in safety have a very special role. Safety is a top priority and is an activity that should never be taken for granted.

I wish you a very successful conference.