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**Tenth United Nations Conference on the
Standardization of Geographical Names**

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Item 5 of the provisional agenda*

**Reports on the work of the United Nations Group of Experts on
Geographical Names, its divisions, working groups and task teams
since the Ninth Conference.**

Summary of Division Reports

Submitted for UNGEGN by Botolv Helleland, Norway and Helen Kerfoot, Canada **

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SUMMARY OF DIVISION REPORTS

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Of the 23 geographical/linguistic UNGEGN divisions, 16 submitted reports (including the Portuguese-speaking Division established in 2007).

1. Structure of the Division reports

The Division reports vary considerably as to their structure, content and length, which is not surprising as the degree of activity and the main focus differ from Division to Division. One should bear in mind that the Divisions are composed of countries with different challenges and different resources and some Divisions may wish to report on activities which others pay less attention to. However, a clearer distinction between Division reports and Country reports may in some cases be desirable.

Many Divisions organize their reports by referring to selected UNGEGN agenda items. Another model refers to resolutions which have been followed up, as for instance in the case of the report of the Dutch- and German-speaking Division addressing progress against 18 resolutions, and in part by the United States / Canada Division, which highlights a follow-up of resolution V/22 relating to the promotion of Aboriginal/ indigenous names. The Africa East Division groups the various activities to meetings held during the five year term. The recently re-activated Africa Central Division reports on progress in association with the 2010 toponymy training course held in Cameroon.

With respect to length, some reports contain a higher number of items and are more detailed than others. Again the report of the Dutch- and German-speaking Division should be mentioned with its comprehensive report of 14 pages, and then the Report of the East Central and South-East Europe Division covering 11 pages. Others are kept quite short, like the Report of the Norden Division.

As for the UN Conferences, governments are invited to submit national reports there may be some uncertainty to which degree a particular item belongs to a Division report or to a Country report. Generally it is expected that activities and projects which are shared by more than one country within a Division should be covered by the Division report. We also see that a number of country-based issues are included in the Division reports and some contain separate sections for each country. For countries that do not submit reports or do not participate at the Conference it is reasonable that the Division report includes topics which are purely national.

The chairmanship of the Divisions normally follows the five-year term between Conferences, in some cases there is a shift during the period; however, some Divisions are chaired independently of Conference cycles.

2. Cooperation

Several Division reports underline the importance of cooperation within a Division. The Asia South-West Division (other than Arabic) underlines the advantages of regional cooperation and its benefit for developing regional spatial data infrastructure which in its turn is important for economic progress of the region. The number of countries in the various Divisions varies; the 22-member Asia South-East and Pacific South-West Division mentions a proposal for splitting the large division into two, but still retaining the regional map and gazetteer project as a joint endeavour. Several Divisions report on various ways of cooperation, not only within the Division, but also with other Divisions, with

UNGEEN Working Groups, and with other relevant organizations within and outside the UN umbrella. For example, the Norden Division reports on cooperation with the Working Group on Toponymic Terminology, and several African Divisions mention the importance of working in conjunction with the Task Team for Africa.

Some Divisions report on the internal structure that they have created to handle different geographical names issues. For example, the Arabic Division has a number of committees, addressing such issues as training, terminology and databases.

Various Divisions, particularly in Africa, mentioned the benefits of the UNGEEN training courses; members of some divisions had participated in the preparation and presentation of these courses (for example, Dutch- and German-speaking Division, US / Canada Division, French-speaking Division). Other Divisions (for instance, Asia South-West Division (other than Arabic) and China Division) reported on training workshops they had organized.

3. Meetings and conferences

The cooperation between Divisions is often triggered by regional and inter-divisional meetings. All of the Divisions report on regional meetings, which indicate a high level of activity in the field of geographical names standardization and toponymy in general. Some Divisions, like the East Central and South-East Europe Division, dedicate a greater part of the report to meetings; and the Baltic Division notes having held five meetings since the 9th UNCSGN, including those that have been held in conjunction with UNGEEN sessions or UN conferences. The Arabic Division has organized three conferences on geographical names standardization for Arabic countries and the Asia South-East and Pacific South-West Division announces an international Toponymy course to be held in September this year.

The report of the Eastern Europe, Northern and Central Asia Division notes a successful joint meeting with the Baltic Division, and also regional meetings in Sofia and Belogradchik (Bulgaria), where topics like the current status of legislative and normative base for geographical names; current status of compilation, development and maintenance of national geographical names databases and catalogues were discussed. The Central Africa Division reports on a successful training seminar on the standardization of geographical names and increasing commitment to the Task Team for Africa.

Some divisions have already planned further meetings after this venue, like the Eastern Europe, Northern and Central Asia Division. There are also inter-divisional activities taking place, for instance reported by the Baltic Division and the French-speaking Division.

The Africa South Division reports on a consultative workshop on the future orientation of geographical names activities in Africa which was held in Gaborone from 23 to 25 November 2011. The workshop was organized jointly by the Government of Botswana, the United Nations Economic Commission for Africa (ECA) and the United Nations Group of Experts on Geographical Names. It was followed up by a workshop organized by South Africa in Johannesburg in 2012. Although opportunities have been created with these activities, some countries in the Division have problems in following up geographical names standardization due to lack of funds.

4. Progress – general, romanization, legislation

Technological developments with electronic storage and dissemination of geographical names data, as well as improved web-based tools, allow general progress in the handling of geographical names. Most

Divisions report on good progress in these areas, but others struggle, for instance, the Africa East Division which in its informative report concludes “Let us hope that the situation will continue to progress and that promoting the geographical names standardization in Africa will not be a utopia”. The political and economic situation remains an obstacle for efficient procedures in the treatment of geographical names standardization in many countries, particularly in Africa.

The report of the Eastern Europe, Northern and Central Asia Division indicates that new romanization systems were developed (in Armenia, Belarus, Georgia, Ukraine), available romanization systems were perfected (in Bulgaria) or continually employed (in Russia).

Some Divisions report on progress in legislation pertaining to geographical names. The Africa South Division notes that Mozambique, in 2009, established an organization (INGEMO) responsible for geographical names and is proposing preparation of a law governing geographical names activities. Other countries in this Division are still struggling to establish a statutory naming authority and support structure.

5. Progress - maps, gazetteers, websites

Several Divisions report that considerable progress has been made in compiling regional maps and gazetteers. The Asia South-East and Pacific South-West Division reports on the completion of a regional map and gazetteer project, led by Australia and New Zealand.

The Dutch- and German-speaking Division reports on a web (gazetteer) service infrastructure, EuroGeoNames, which has been implemented for providing official data on geographical names in Europe. Within the EuroGeoNames project, an Exonyms and Other Variant Names Database for European geographical names has been developed. Furthermore, members of the Division have provided names data for the United Nations Group of Experts on Geographical Names database. That Division also notes that the establishment of a National Geographical Names Authority for Suriname will be the first step towards the national standardization of geographical names in the country.

The Report of the Latin America Division informs us about a gazetteer on the toponymy of the Islas Malvinas and of technical standards concerning geographical names and domiciles in Mexico.

Disseminating information on toponymy and standardization is developing positively due to the creation of web sites, and several Divisions report on their home pages. A number of Divisions have updated or recently established their web sites, like the Arabic Division, the Baltic Division, the East Central and South-East Europe Division, the Norden Division and the newly established Portuguese-speaking Division. There is reason to believe that web sites increasingly will serve as a forum for exchange of geographical names expertise.

The French-speaking Division mentions a new *Bulletin d'information toponymique* accessible on the web. The Division also stresses the importance of toponymic education. The Eastern Europe, Northern and Central Asia Division has also issued a Bulletin on changes in geographical names within the member countries.

6. Other activities

The question of geographical names as part of the cultural heritage is rarely mentioned explicitly. One exception is the French-speaking Division which refers to the UNESCO Convention on the intangible cultural heritage. That Division has supported the initiative of creating a university chair in toponymy,

however, so far without success. Another Division very involved with cultural heritage is the China Division, which since 2004 has been producing publications and a TV series on protection of China's geographical names; the most recent documents (2012) have identified standards of cultural heritage protection of geographical names of China.

7. Conclusion

The level of activity indicated by many Divisions is certainly high, and many Division reports indicate the usefulness of these structures for countries with similar standardization issues to discuss regional challenges and best practices, and to exchange documentation in languages suitable to Division participants.

This summary comprises just a few points from the 16 Divisions reports, but of course does not give enough credit to all the work behind them. They should be read and studied in full.

The question of a template for a recommended structure for Division reports to make it easier to compare activities has previously been discussed, but as mentioned the very varied nature of the Divisions and their activity levels makes a single approach rather difficult to apply to all Divisions. However, some editors of Division reports might find some such template advantageous. The simplest recipe would probably be to report on selected UNGEGN agenda items, which many Divisions in fact do, to some extent. Other options include reporting by joint activities, by Conference resolutions, by Division meetings, or by steps taken to orchestrate the work of a Division. While in the Conference agenda, reports from governments are a separate agenda item, at the UNGEGN Sessions this is not the case, so information on progress in individual countries can then certainly be annexed to the Division reports.

Division Reports received at time of writing:

Report of the Asia South-East and Pacific South-West Division, E/CONF.101/9

L'activité de la division francophone, E/CONF.101/18

Report of the Arabic Division of experts on geographical names (ADEGN) 2007-2012, E/CONF.101/22

Report of Eastern Europe, Northern and Central Asia Division, E/CONF.101/24

Report of the Africa South Division, E/CONF.101/36/Rev.1

Report of the Baltic Division, E/CONF.101/67

Report of the East Central and South-East Europe Division (ECSEED) 2007-2012, E/CONF.101/75

Report of the Norden Division, E/CONF.101/87/Rev.2

Report of the Dutch- and German-speaking Division, E/CONF.101/92

Activities of Asia South-West Division (other than Arabic) United Nations Group of Experts on Geographical Names, E/CONF.101/101

Africa East Division Report, E/CONF.101/105

Division de l' Afrique Centrale, E/CONF.101/106

Informe de la División de América Latina, E/CONF.101/108

Report of the United States/Canada Division, E/CONF.101/131

Report of the China Division, E/CONF.101/CRP5

Report of the Portuguese-speaking Division, E/CONF.101/CRP17

In addition, the Report of the Task Team for Africa, E/CONF.101/27 has been submitted under this agenda item.