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UN EXPERT GROUP ON GEOGRAPHICAL NAMES CONCLUDES SEVENTEENTH SESSION

The following communiqué was issued today by United Nations Group of Experts on Geographical Names:

In pursuance of Economic and Social Council decision 1988/116, the United Nations Secretary-General invited the United Nations Group of Experts on Geographical Names to convene its Seventeenth Session at Headquarters from 13 to 24 June.

The session was attended by 69 experts and observers from United Nations Member States, representing 17 of the 21 geographical linguistic divisions of the Group.

The Group was chaired by an expert from South Africa.

The Department for Development Support and Management Services of the United Nations Secretariat provided Secretariat services for the Group, which was established some 30 years ago and which comprises experts in cartography and toponymy from United Nations Member States of the United Nations.

The standardization of geographical names is crucial for effective communication, as well as critical for questions of reaffirming traditional culture as effective expressions of national identity and culture (particularly as regards indigenous peoples), education and training, tourism, trade and commerce, transportation, regional and environmental planning, science and technology, search and rescue operations, or merely normal day-to-day orientation and communication between people.

The experts considered many questions, ranging from courses, seminars and practical training in toponymy, to romanization systems and the reduction of the use of exonyms, that is traditional or conventional names.

One example illustrating the Group's work was "Toponymic Guidelines for Map and Other Editors". The document was described as among the most useful products of the Group, since those guidelines enable map editors and other editors worldwide to treat correctly the geographical names of the countries

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which prepared the Guidelines. Hitherto, the Guidelines were published in the second volumes (Technical Papers) of the reports of United Nations Conferences on the Standardization of Geographical Names and in the World Cartography Bulletin.

Another important achievement of the Group was the preparation of a multi-lingual (six languages) dictionary of terms used in the standardization of geographical names.

During the session the experts discussed more than 80 documents prepared on behalf of geographical/linguistic divisions and of countries. Special attention was paid to changes in geographical names in countries where dramatic changes in government structure had taken place.

The Group advised countries to activate the preparation of national legislative documents on the standardization of geographical names and to provide the documents to the Group, to serve as models for those countries which still do not have them. Also discussed was the creation of databases of geographical names and the compilation of national catalogues of geographical names (gazetteers), as well as the dissemination of information to the public at large.

The work of the experts at its just concluded session was part of the preparations for the 1997 Seventh United Nations Conference on the Standardization of Geographical Names, one of the goals of which is to ensure effective communication, with its concomitant social and economic benefits.

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