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REPORT OF COMMITTEE III
WRITING SYSTEMS

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First session, Wednesday 6 September - a.m.-

The Chairman of Committee III, Mr. H.A.G. Lewis (United Kingdom) opened the session by reviewing the list of documents to be discussed and proposed that the subject of the transference of names should be divided into four categories:

- (i) from ideograms
- (ii) from syllabic scripts
- (iii) from the Roman alphabet
- (iv) from non-Roman scripts

The Chairman drew attention to the Report of the Group of Experts (E/CONF.53/L.1 and L.2) and specifically to Recommendation VII in the latter paper. The Chairman asked delegates to note that Recommendation VII was concerned with both national standardization and with the transference of names from one writing system to another and therefore was for consideration by both Committee I and Committee III. As far as Committee III was concerned, aspects of transliteration and transcription would be discussed; other subject matter would be referred to Committee I as necessary. Mr. Lambert, Chairman of Committee I, agreed that the two Committees would coordinate their activities.

The delegate of the United States of America drew attention to document E/CONF.53/L.26, which must be studied in conjunction with L.26/Add.1. It was accepted that the principles governing transference from a given writing system to another were not necessarily the same as those for transference in the reverse direction. The delegate of Norway drew attention to the difficulties involved in many countries because of the varying phonetic value attributed to the letters of the Roman alphabet, and proposed the creation of a Roman alphabet with as few special signs as possible for international use. The delegate of the Federal Republic of Germany proposed that nations whose writing system was other than the Roman alphabet should establish an official system of transliteration and that for a given language there should be one single system. The delegates of Spain, Mexico, Fed. Repul. of Germany and Austria questioned the definitions of the words "transcription" and "transliteration" as given in E/CONF.53/L.2. A Working Party was formed to draft new definitions and it was agreed that provisionally the definitions given in E/CONF.53/L.2 should be accepted as working definitions for Committee III.

The delegate of the USSR drew attention to the special problems of transcription from the Roman alphabet into Cyrillic. The Chairman proposed the acceptance of a further guiding principle: in determining the method of transference of names from a given writing system into another, the decisive factor should be the preference of the users of the latter or "receiver" system.

Second session, Wednesday, 6 September - p.m.

The Chairman announced the composition of a Working Group on Recommendation VII to consist of the representatives of Iran (convener), USA, UK, USSR, France, Libya and Ethiopia.

The delegate of Ghana said that Recommendation VII was acceptable to him and that the numerous languages of his country could be recorded in the Roman alphabet with the help of a few special letters. The delegate of Norway said that in his country Lappish names were treated similarly. The Chairman recommended the avoidance of special letters of unfamiliar form. The delegate of the USSR said that it was the practice in his country to record non-Russian languages in the Cyrillic alphabet without special letters or signs even though this might mean a loss of phonetic accuracy. Geographical names should not be written in a different form from ordinary words. The delegates of the USA and Kenya agreed in deprecating the use of unfamiliar signs.

The delegate of the UK pointed out that it was possible to distinguish a "reference form" of a name used for practical purposes from an "information form" affording greater precision. The delegate of the USA, however, preferred the use of a single transcription.

The delegate of the USSR said that in view of the diverse values assigned to Roman alphabet letters in the various countries using that alphabet, his country had adopted for the English-language version of their world atlas a system for transcribing names from Cyrillic characters similar to that of the International Organization for Standardization (ISO) but with a number of modifications.

At the Chairman's request the representative of the International Organization for Standardization explained that the systems adopted by the latter for transliteration from various scripts were arrived at by agreement among the national standardization organizations and that some of the systems were currently undergoing modification. The delegates of France and the UK said that the standardization organizations of their respective countries were private and not official bodies.

Third session, Wednesday, 13 September - a.m.

The Chairman invited the delegate of Austria to join the Working Group set up at the previous session. He proposed for discussion the question of the recording of names in multi-lingual areas or in unwritten languages. The delegate of the USSR said that the practice in his country for the transcription of names from less known or unwritten languages was to use diacritics or the international phonetic alphabet (IPA). The delegates of Ghana and Liberia also favoured the IPA, but the representative of Kenya said there was sometimes difficulty in finding name-recorders who were familiar with it. The delegate of Cameroon thought ^{from a practical point of view} it desirable to use English or French transcriptions which might be approximate rather than wait for skilled linguists to achieve more perfect ones. The delegate of USA preferred direct transference from the unwritten language to that used on the map. The delegate of Norway said that the main requirements were that the name as transcribed should be recognizable by the local people, and that those to whom it was not previously known should be able to pronounce it correctly. Tape-recording had been useful in the case of Lapp names. The Chairman said it was agreed that the IPA might be useful but that it was not the only suitable method: the alphabet of a kindred written language might also be used. The delegate of USA said that tape-recorders of a size suitable for use in the field might not be sufficiently accurate. The Chairman added that difficulty was caused by names which changed their pronunciation in declension.

Reverting to the treatment of languages already possessing a script, the Chairman opened the question whether transcription or transliteration was preferable. The delegate of USA said that it depended on whether the script from which names were being rendered was phonetic or not: in the former case transliteration was suitable.

The delegate of Austria suggested that it would be appropriate for the Conference to accept the systems of transliteration devised by the ISO, subject to minor amendments, if necessary. The Chairman, supported by the delegate of the USA, said that the Committee should consider all existing systems carefully and make appropriate recommendations within the UN framework. The delegate of the UK said that the ISO systems were not primarily devised for geographers but for documentation, bibliography, etc., and that to adopt them would simply mean adding one more to the number of systems already proposed for each language or writing system. The delegate of the Federal Republic of Germany supported the Austrian proposal. The representative of the ISO undertook to distribute to the Committee copies of the systems devised by his organization for Cyrillic, Arabic and Hebrew. He explained that these systems reflected a large measure of international agreement among ISO Member Bodies, which included a wide cross-section of users of the Roman alphabet; they had not, however, been specifically devised for geographers and it was open to nations to suggest amendments to them.

Fourth session, p.m., Wednesday, 13 September

Continuing the discussion on the ISO system, the Chairman noted that the latter's practice of seeking the agreement of the 'donor' country (i.e. that using the script out of which names were being transcribed) was at variance with the principle adopted by the Committee according to which the decisive factor was the preference of the receiver. He pointed out that the ISO system for Hebrew had too many diacritics to be suitable for cartographic purposes. The delegate of Belgium pointed out that the International Committee on Onomastic Sciences had proposed the setting up of a committee of experts to devise a uniform system of transcription into the Roman alphabet. The delegate of the USSR drew attention to the danger of multiplying systems and pointed out that the ISO systems provided for transliteration only, which distorted the pronunciation in the case of languages not written phonetically. The delegate of the USA said that the objective should be to distort names as little as possible in either spelling or pronunciation.

The delegate of the UK suggested that the problem of reducing the number of systems could be tackled on a regional basis: the ISO system for Cyrillic was apparently acceptable to German-speaking countries, while the UK and USA had reached agreement on a system of their own which had widely applied. The delegate of Kenya said that the ISO system for Arabic appeared designed to reconcile English and French forms. The delegate of France pointed out that the report of the Committee of Experts had suggested that in default of universal agreement among Roman alphabet users, partial uniformity might be achieved on the basis of systems conforming respectively to English, French and Spanish writing conventions. In the case of Arabic names transliterated into French, the sounds which could not be represented in the French form of the Roman alphabet were denoted by widely known conventional signs. This was, in practice, a matter for the country using the Arabic alphabet which wished to publish its names in romanized form.

The Chairman recalled that the ISO was a non-governmental body and noted that its recommendations did not command universal acceptance for cartographic purposes. Alternative proposals had been advanced for the creation of a single system for international use differing from that of the ISO, or for systems based on national requirements, or again on agreement between the users respectively of English, French and Spanish, as the three UN official languages which used the Roman alphabet.

The delegate of the UK said that the practical aspect must be considered. Tens of thousands of names had been transliterated and used in maps and gazetteers according to English or French Roman alphabet systems, and none as yet according to the ISO recommendations. If a new system were adopted all this work would have to be redone. He explained that while the UK Permanent Committee on Geographical Names and the US Board on Geographic Names had agreed between themselves on a system for the transliteration of Arabic, the PCGN had accepted the French-style Roman alphabet renderings of names in Tunisia and elsewhere as these were of long standing.

The delegate of Libya said that there should be a uniform system for all Arab countries based on classical Arabic; he did not regard the ISO system as

satisfactory for geographical purposes. The delegate of the USSR suggested that the use of English or French Roman alphabet systems for Arabic and other scripts might be a useful intermediate stage on the way to complete standardization. Speaking generally, he thought it useful that each country should indicate fully the basis on which its gazetteers etc. were compiled.

Upon a suggestion by the delegate of Mexico that a sub-committee might be set up to draft a compromise system for Arabic, the delegates of Libya and Lebanon pointed out that not enough Arab countries and organizations were represented at the Conference for such an attempt to be useful. As the result of a further suggestion by the delegate of Mexico, a study group was formed of delegates of Lebanon, Libya, UK, and USA to draft a proposal to place before Arab League nations with the object of arriving at a single system of romanization.

Fifth session, Friday, 15 September - a.m.

The Chairman made a summary of the principal stages of agreement reached by the Conference at its previous sessions. These were:

1. The problems of transferring from writing system A to writing system B were different from those in transferring from writing system B to writing system A.
2. In transferring from one writing system to another, the final choice of method rested with the receiver language and not the donor language.
3. Account should be taken of work already carried out by the donor language.
4. In transferring from one writing system to another, preserving the original pronunciation is not a feasible aim.
5. The transference from one writing system to another can be either by a direct transposition of one letter for another or by rendering the sounds in their appropriate equivalent in another writing system. In either event the method of carrying out the transfer would be determined by the receiver language.

6. The varying pronunciations of the letters of the Roman alphabet made agreement on a single international system an extremely difficult problem.
7. In drawing up romanization systems, efforts should be made to limit the number of diacritical signs and modified letters to the minimum possible.
8. In devising modified letters the modification should not be so great as to make recognition or association with unmodified letters difficult. Maximum publicity should be given to the phonetic value of the letters so modified.
9. For the recording of unwritten languages the methods to be recommended in order of preference were:
 - (a) recording in a phonemic writing system,
 - (b) recording in the alphabet of the International Phonetic Association
 - (i) by a narrow phonetic transcription for the scientific recording of the language if possible
 - (ii) by a broad phonetic rendering for the purpose of recording the geographical name.
 - (c) recording in the alphabet of a related language for which an alphabet exists,
 - (d) recording directly into a conventional alphabet:
 - (i) by an informed recorder,
 - (ii) by an uninformed recorder.
10. IPA symbols will not be used for the writing of geographical names on published maps. In gazetteers the IPA symbols would be a valuable addition to the geographical name to give an indication of pronunciation.
11. The difference between the ISO system for the writing of Cyrillic and the Russian Academy system have been noted and discussed.
12. The question of how much regard should be paid to work already carried out and published in the form of maps, gazetteers, etc., has been discussed but no firm conclusions have been reached.

13. A Working Party has been formed to study how best to bring about a single Roman alphabet system for the writing of Arabic.
14. The Group of Experts in their report as well as some delegates to the present Conference had pointed out that if a final international standardization in one system was not possible an intermediate measure may be to propose romanization in terms of two or possibly more Roman alphabet languages.

Since there were no objections to the principles enumerated above they were accepted as the working basis for Committee III at this and subsequent sessions.

The Chairman moved to the next item on the agenda which was the possible adoption of a standard system for the writing of geographical names in Iran. Discussion ensued on whether the principle behind the adoption of this system conflicted with the donor-receiver concept. Delegates taking part in the discussion were Switzerland, USA, Austria and the United Kingdom. Both the USA and the UK drew attention to the existence of a large amount of mapping carried out in the system.

Thailand and Ethiopia also proposed the acceptance of their romanization systems for international use. Considerable discussion took place on the donor-receiver concept. Those taking part were Cameroon, USSR, Hungary, Austria, Germany, Ethiopia and Poland. Among the points made by the delegates of Hungary, Bulgaria, Poland and Germany was the proposal to adopt the Russian Academy System for the transference of Russian into Cyrillic.

The delegate of Kenya suggested multilateral discussions with Arabic-speaking nations to try to reach a satisfactory romanization system.

The delegate of the Lebanon supported the adoption of the system for the transliteration of geographical names in Iran, provided it did not commit the Arab countries as a whole. The delegate of Libya, supported the delegate of the Lebanon. The Chairman assured the delegates of the Lebanon and Libya that no such commitment was implied and proposed that questions on such matters should be referred to the United Nations Permanent Committee of Experts if, in due course, it was formed.

Sixth session, Tuesday 19 September - a.m.

The Chairman opened the discussion on the draft resolution circulated at the previous session and signed by the delegates of Austria, Denmark, Finland, Germany, Hungary, Kenya, Luxembourg, Netherlands, Norway, Sweden, Switzerland and a number of other countries. He recalled that while the ultimate objective was the achievement of a single system for transference into the Roman alphabet, the experts' report had envisaged the possibility of separate English, French and Spanish systems as an intermediate stage. He was not clear as to the meaning of the expression "for international use" in the draft resolution and suggested that this should be left aside for the time being. He drew attention to the relevance of paragraph 11, sub-paragraphs (f) and (g), and paragraph 12 of E/CONF.53/L.1.

The delegate of Norway said that he did not understand the draft resolution as calling for the immediate adoption of a Roman alphabet system but merely for efforts in that direction. The delegate of Spain said that the Spanish form of the Roman alphabet was adequate to most of the sounds expressed by the Cyrillic script. The delegate of Austria said that for the past hundred years or so scholars in central and eastern Europe had used a system for Cyrillic based on the Czech or Groat forms of the Roman alphabet; this was close to the ISO system and to that used by the Soviet Union and the eastern European countries in their sheets of the International Map of the World on the scale of 1:2,500,000. Moreover, the ISO had at the beginning of 1967 issued a revised version of their system which was even closer to the Soviet one. At the same time this revised system included a set of permitted variants which went far to meet the point of view of English users of the Roman alphabet.

The delegate of the USA said that there was no time to discuss the details of all existing systems in the present Committee. They should be compared thoroughly and without prejudice, and he pointed out that the ISO system for Cyrillic had been applied on a minute scale by comparison with the BGN/PCGN system, which during the past 24 years had been applied to hundreds of thousands of geographical names.

The delegate of Norway said that the Committee should not concentrate too exclusively on work already done but should look to the future. The delegate of Spain said that his country would find it hard to give up conventional names, but he agreed that the ultimate aim was to reduce the UN linguistic "pentagon" to a triangle and then to a circle.

The delegate of Austria expressed the view that the same system should be used for purposes of documentation as for map-making. Each country was entitled to preserve its own system for national use alongside the international one which it was hoped to create. Questioned by the delegate of the USA, he said that he did not regard the BGN/PCGN system as suitable for international use because it was based too exclusively on English usage. The Chairman pointed out that the ISO system could only be regarded as relatively acceptable to English users if the set of variants already referred to were adopted.

The delegate of the USSR expressed the view, which the Chairman endorsed, that consultation between experts on a regional basis would be useful. The delegate of the UK pointed out a further source of divergence between the ISO and the Soviet system in that the former provided for direct transliteration from Ukrainian and White Russian into the Roman alphabet, whereas in the Soviet Union names from these languages were rendered in Great Russian spelling which was then transferred into the Roman alphabet. It was also argued on behalf of the UK that standardization should not do violence to the linguistic habits of the speakers of the major world languages.

Seventh session, Wednesday, 20 September - a.m.

Discussion continued on the draft resolution concerning a single romanization system for non-Roman scripts. Amendments were proposed by the delegates of the USA and the UK. The latter expressed the view that the revised draft still did not take sufficient account of the diversity of forms of the Roman alphabet and that the wording should be made less categorical to avoid raising false hopes of uniformity. The delegate of Norway said that on the other hand it was necessary to give an encouraging account of the achievements of the Conference. The delegate of the USSR

said that a single Roman alphabet system was a remote ideal and that in the meantime adaptations should be proposed for each Roman alphabet country. The observer of the International Hydrographic Bureau said that his authorities had for some years advocated the establishment of uniform romanization systems [document E/CONF.53/L.54]. The delegate of the USA pointed out that geographical names were not the exclusive property of experts but belonged to the world public, and that the Conference must keep in touch with the latter if its work was not to be divorced from reality. The delegate of the Netherlands undertook to amend the draft resolution further in the light of the discussion.

The Committee discussed draft resolution on (a), the retention, in maps, of accents and similar marks which were necessary for the exact reading of names in French, Spanish, Portuguese and other languages, and (b) transcription from classical Arabic.

The Committee then considered the proposal by Iran that the system used officially for the romanization of geographical names in Iran be adopted as the standard system of transliteration. The proposal was accepted without opposition.

The Committee then accepted unanimously as the standard system for the writing of geographical names of Thailand, the system described in E/CONF.53/L.20.

The delegate of China made a statement on the method of romanization applied in his country on the basis of the Wade-Giles system. The delegate of Hungary suggested that consideration be also given to the system devised in mainland China. The delegate of China replied that the mainland authorities had ceased to use this and were making increasing use of the modified Wade-Giles system. He further reminded delegates that his Government represented China at the United Nations and was a permanent member of the Security Council. At the suggestion of the delegate of Romania, supported by those of Hungary, Poland and Austria, it was agreed to refer this matter to the proposed UN Permanent Commission on Geographical Names.

The delegate of Liberia raised the question of the romanization of African syllabic languages and the correct pronunciation of African names. The Chairman invited the delegates of the States immediately concerned to formulate a draft resolution.

The Chairman commended to the attention of the Committee a draft resolution by the representative of the Holy See on the need for researchers and others concerned to respect the historical, cultural and other associations of place-names.

Eighth session, Thursday, 21 September - a.m.

The Chairman presented the Draft Report of Committee III, and asked for such corrections and amendments from delegates as might be appropriate.

The Chairman said that he had received from the Austrian delegate and others memoranda expressing views on matters which had been discussed in the course of the Conference. As there was no time for further discussion of these in the present session he requested that they be addressed to him as Chairman of Committee III and he would forward them to the United Nations Permanent Commission of Experts on Geographical Names for action.

The Chairman referred to the two alternative definitions of the words "transliteration" and "transcription" which had been circulated,^{*/} and proposed reference of both definitions to the United Nations Permanent Commission of Experts on Geographical Names for final decision. This was agreed. The delegate of Mexico reminded the Conference that in Spanish the meanings of the two words were exactly transposed as compared to English. The Chairman undertook to bring this point and the views of other delegates to the United Nations Permanent Commission of Experts on Geographical Names.

The Chairman drew attention to the proposed recommendation submitted by the delegate of the Holy See and introduced as a topic at the previous session. He suggested that the matter came within the sphere of Committee I. The Chairman of Committee I concurred. It was agreed that the Holy See would submit a memorandum to the Chairman of Committee I for transmission to the United Nations Permanent Commission of Experts on Geographical Names if the Recommendation on the Office Treatment of Geographical Names did not cover the points in question.

^{*/} See Annex.

The two separate wordings of a resolution on the romanization of Thai were discussed and a single text approved.

Draft resolutions 1 and 2 were accepted without change.

The two separate wordings of a resolution on the romanization of Persian were discussed and a single text approved.

Resolution 4 was adopted without amendment.

The applicability of the resolution to Greek was accepted in principle by the delegation of Cyprus but in the absence of a delegation from Greece the question was referred to the United Nations Permanent Commission of Experts on Geographical Names.

A revised text of resolution 5 on the romanization of names in Ethiopia was accepted.

Resolution 8 was accepted without amendment, subject to possible editorial improvement by the United Nations Permanent Commission of Experts on Geographical Names in due course.

A recommendation on the question of the romanization of Chinese was approved.

The third draft of the recommendation concerning item 11 was approved with one minor addition.

The draft resolution on the problem of unwritten languages in Africa submitted by the delegate of Liberia was approved.

The resolutions appear in document E/CONF.53/2/Add.3.

The Chairman regretted that there would not now be time to discuss a recommendation proposed by the delegate of Cambodia on the romanization of Cambodian geographical names but he would send it to the United Nations Permanent Commission of Experts on Geographical Names for action.

The Chairman thanked delegations for their participation in the work of Committee III and the session was closed.

ANNEX

DEFINITION A

TRANSLITERATION is a method of transferring names from one language to another, in which a particular letter or other graphic sign in the original language is regularly represented by one and the same letter or combination of letters in the second language. Unlike transcription, it is usually reversible.

TRANSCRIPTION is a method of transferring names from one language to another, in which the sound of each individual name is represented as accurately as possible in the script of the second language.

DEFINITION B

TRANSLITERATION and TRANSCRIPTION are means of transferring names from one language into another.

TRANSLITERATION uses the letters of a conventional phonetic system and is reversible; TRANSCRIPTION uses those of the second language according to their customary phonetic value.