

**The 24th Session of the United Nations Group of Experts on Geographical Names
New York, 20 and 31 August 2007**

**Opening Session,
Monday 20 August 2007, 10.30am
Conference room 2**

**Statement of Paul Cheung,
Director, UN Statistics Division, DESA**

**Madame Chair;
Distinguished Delegates and Observers, Ladies and Gentlemen,**

It is a great pleasure for me to welcome you here in New York for the 24th session of the UN Group of Experts on Geographical Names. As you know, the UN Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC) created the UN Conference on the Standardization of Geographical Names, which held its first meeting in 1967. One year later, ECOSOC approved the terms of reference for an 'Ad hoc Group of Experts' which was later renamed the 'UN Group of Experts on Geographical Names'. One of UNGEGN's mandates is to undertake preparatory work for the periodic international conferences on the standardization of geographical names, to provide continuity for activities between conferences and to provide leadership in the implementation of resolutions adopted at the conferences.

The Ninth United Nations Conference on the Standardization of Geographical Names will start tomorrow. I am very pleased to report that my team here in the UN Statistics Division of the Department for Economic and Social Affairs has been working very closely with many of you in the past months to prepare for this Conference. We are particularly pleased with the high number of confirmed participants, representing all regions around the world. Judging by the number of papers and documents which have been prepared, we will certainly have an interesting and busy two weeks ahead.

Before this Expert Group starts its work, permit me to share with you some reflections on the importance of geographical information, on recent accomplishments as well as on future challenges ahead of us.

Let me begin by underlining the importance of accurate and timely as well as standardized geographical information, of which geographical names are an essential element. Economic, social and environmental planning, as well as emergency management depends on good quality geographic information. As a professional in the field of official statistics, I am convinced that the combination and integration of statistical and geographical information is one of the great challenges ahead of us and will yield great dividends. In this respect the fast-evolving information technology offers us great opportunities with respect to information management. Combining detailed and high quality geographic information systems with economic, social and environmental data will provide powerful tools for analysis and policy making.

As we pool information together across domains, districts, countries, and around the world, the critical importance of 'standardization' becomes apparent as the foundation for comparability and comprehension. The standardization of geographical names is indeed a critical part of the global statistical infrastructure and serves the user community globally. It permits users from around the world, via the internet or other means, to access and compare the information provided. Standardization also helps us, the producers of information, as it creates a common platform among different countries, upon which experiences can be meaningfully exchanged and comparability of information becomes possible.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

The United Nations Conference on the Standardization of Geographical Names can now look back proudly on a 40-year history of work. The experts of UNGEGN, with your many working groups and divisions, have of course played a crucial role in translating the resolutions of the Conference, covering a broad spectrum of areas, into concrete actions. While I will not attempt a comprehensive appraisal of the recent achievements of countries and UNGEGN Divisions and Working Groups, permit me to highlight some of the important work undertaken by the UNGEGN in close cooperation with the UN Statistics Division, especially since the 8th Conference took place in Berlin, Germany in 2002.

Enhanced UNGEGN Web site

The UNGEGN Secretariat, with the help of the UNGEGN Chair, has improved the Geographic Information web site to facilitate communication with member states and experts, and help promote and realize the goals and resolutions of the Conferences. The web site has now been updated to make available more documentation from past Conferences and UNGEGN sessions. This work will continue to make all past Conferences and UNGEGN sessions reports accessible on the website in the near future.

Production of technical and promotional material

(i) The *Manual for the national standardization of geographical names* was produced by the United Nations Statistics Division in 2006. The objective of the publication (published in the six languages of the UN) is to provide guidelines on how to standardize writing of geographical names. We would like to thank all members of the Working Group on Publicity and Funding, and in particular its convener, as well as the volunteers from among the experts of UNGEGN, who gave freely of their expertise and time to make this publication a reality.

(ii) The *Technical reference manual for the standardization of geographical names* was released recently. The contents of this manual are primarily the results of the efforts of three Expert Working Groups: on Romanization Systems; on Country names; and on Toponymic Data Files and Gazetteers. This was made possible because of the dedication of UNGEGN experts who worked on the material, and the conveners of these Working Groups who coordinated the various efforts and ensured that the texts were suitable for publication.

(iii) The 2nd UNGEGN brochure, *Geographical names as vital keys for accessing information in our globalized and digital world* is also another important publication for

promoting the use of standardized geographic names. The English-language version was produced through the UNGEGN Working Group on Publicity and Funding. The brochure was translated and printed in all the six UN official languages by the United Nations. The objectives of the brochure are to better publicize the importance of accurate and consistent geographical names, by giving an insight into their uses at local and national level, and to promote the economic and social benefits of the consistent use of place names.

(iv) Besides the aforementioned special publications, the **UNGEGN Bulletin** continues to be published twice a year, serving as an important information platform among the expert community. The latest enhanced issues have been disseminated as e-bulletins through the UNGEGN website.

UNGEGN Project on Geographical Names Database

At your 22nd Session, held in New York in April 2004, UNGEGN, recommended the development of a data storage system to collect, manage and disseminate names of countries and major cities with a population of more than 100.000. As a result, we initiated the process of building a database to store country names and major city names of the world in a multilingual, multi-scriptural and geo-referenced database. The database is expected to contribute to the objective of limiting the use of exonyms in international cartography by linking them to the appropriate endonyms. Furthermore, the audio-aid provided for the pronunciation of endonyms should encourage their use. We will be presenting to you during the conference the latest developments on this database and we are looking forward to your guidance and support to ultimately make this tool available for public use through a web interface.

These are only some of the specific projects where we have been working together in the recent past. The organization and sponsoring of training activities at the national level in different parts of the world is yet another important example of how UNSD has supported UNGEGN's work. I would like to take this opportunity to assure you of our continued commitment to be your partner in the various UNGEGN endeavors.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

Before I conclude, let me briefly mention two specific challenges which I see ahead of us:

(i) Enhancing the technical focus of the Conference and the UNGEGN work

As mentioned above, the Conference and the UNGEGN have made important technical contributions to the global process of standardization of geographical names. Whilst we are of course operating in a political context, it is for us to remind ourselves that technical bodies function best when they maintain their technical focus. I believe we are more likely to make tangible and practical progress, if we build on the considerable technical expertise found in this room and focus our mind on how to build this global statistical infrastructure on standardized geographic names.

(ii) Improving the working methods

Several subsidiary bodies of ECOSOC have in recent years successfully conducted a review of their working methods, including for instance the way they set their agenda, the way they manage their time and the way they communicate and operate outside the formal meetings. I understand that UNGEGN is also planning to look at some of its working methods and I encourage you to comprehensively reflect on how your interactions and those of the Conference could be made even more efficient, taking for instance advantage of the opportunities offered by new information technologies. The Secretariat will gladly share information on positive experiences made by other ECOSOC bodies.

In concluding, I would like to take this opportunity to say a special word of thanks to our dynamic UNGEGN Chair Ms. Helen Kerfoot, who passionately and tirelessly works for the cause of the standardization of geographical names. We at UNSD have greatly benefited from her substantive inputs and her creative proposals in the process of preparing this UNGEGN session and the Conference. I would also like to put on record our appreciation of all the experts who have worked hard with us in one function or another to make these events here possible. I wish you all a very successful UNGEGN session and Conference.

Thank you.