

United Nations

Press Release

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Sixth UN Conference on the
Standardization of Geographical Names
10th Meeting (PM)
and Round-up of Session

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SIXTH UN CONFERENCE ON STANDARDIZATION OF GEOGRAPHICAL NAMES

NEW YORK, 25 AUGUST-3 SEPTEMBER

Calls on United Nations to Financially Assist Training Courses on Applied Toponymy; Selects Venue for Next Conference

The United Nations should financially assist seminars and training courses on applied toponymy -- the science of naming geographic features -- for participants from developing countries and others, according to one of four resolutions adopted this afternoon as the Sixth United Nations Conference on the Standardization of Geographical Names concluded its work.

The Conference also recommended to the Economic and Social Council that the next Conference be convened in Iran, in the second half of 1997. In a related oral resolution, the Conference recommended that at the 1997 Conference, which was also the thirtieth anniversary of the First Conference, an event should be organized to commemorate the pioneers of international cooperation in the field of toponymy.

By another resolution adopted this afternoon, the Conference recommended that the United Nations Group of Experts on Geographical Names establish liaison with the Scientific Committee on Antarctic Research (SCAR) for the purpose of communicating between the two bodies and providing a periodic written report on SCAR activities related to collating geographic names in the Antarctic.

In a closing statement, Dunja Pastizzi-Ferencic, Director of the Science, Technology, Energy, Environment and Natural Resources Division of the Department of Economic and Social Development, said the Conference had demonstrated the increasing relevance of the subject of geographical names in the modern world. The deliberations, she said, had touched on sensitive political issues, but had not disrupted the technical nature of the work. That, no doubt, was a manifestation of the post-cold-war era of openness and international understanding as well as the expanding role of the United Nations.

(more)

The Conference President, President Abdelhadi Tazi (Morocco), in his closing statement, said the current session had been productive and expressed optimism about the future of international cooperation in the field of toponymy.

Resolutions Adopted

In addition to the four resolutions adopted today, the final report of the Conference contains nine others which were adopted at earlier meetings. Among those was a resolution stating that the deliberate changing of geographical names by "unauthorized bodies" could lead to the loss of cultural and historical heritage.

Also by that resolution, the Conference discouraged the unauthorized changing of nationally recognized geographical names established by a legally constituted entity, and stated that the United Nations should not recognize geographical names given by any unauthorized body.

Other recommendations of the Conference, which will be transmitted to the Economic and Social Council, include:

-- the regular publication of a list of country names in their official language or languages;

-- the production of a dictionary of toponymic terminology in all six official languages of the United Nations by the Working Group on Toponymic Terminology, as well as the translation of a new glossary of toponymic terminology into all official United Nations languages;

-- the maintenance of a list of national authorities dealing with geographical names;

-- the publication of toponymic guidelines prepared by national authorities for editors of maps and other publications;

-- the establishment of three new divisions -- Africa South, Baltic and Eastern Europe, North and Central Asia Divisions-- of the Group of Experts;

-- the establishment of a working group on information, publicity and funding, within the Group of Experts to investigate methods for securing adequate funds for the Group's activities; and

-- the revision of the aims and functions of the statute of the Group of Experts in such a way as to improve the Group's functioning.

The Conference also recommended that Brazil, El Salvador, Spain, Mexico, Portugal and Venezuela re-activate the Latin America Division of the Group of Experts.

(more)

Discussions

Among the issues raised over the course of the Conference, which began on 25 August, was the importance of developing databases to store and share cartographic information and the advantages of computerized map-making.

Other matters discussed were the transliteration of local naming into the Roman alphabet, and the preparation of gazetteers -- compendiums of names, features and "locative information". The need to sensitize the public and politicians to the work of national committees dealing with geographical names was stressed by two African representatives, who called for increased technical assistance to the countries of that continent. Representatives of countries of the former Soviet Union and Eastern Europe described how political changes there had precipitated numerous alterations of place-names.

The conference drew some 120 participants from 50 countries, international organizations, specialized agencies and non-governmental organizations.

The United Nations convenes a conference on the standardization of geographical names every five years. The main objective of the conference is the reduction of alternative names for the same places around the world, as well as the simplification and standardization of such names.

Officers

The Chairman of the Sixth Conference was Abdelhadi Tazi (Morocco). The Vice-Chairmen were Richard Randall (United States), Hamid Malmirian (Iran) and Wang Jitong (China). Art Maolfabhail (Ireland) was the Rapporteur and Helen Kerfoot (Canada) was the Editor-in-Chief.

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