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REPORTS BY DIVISIONS AND GOVERNMENTS ON THE SITUATION
IN THEIR REGIONS AND COUNTRIES AND ON THE PROGRESS MADE
IN THE STANDARDIZATION OF GEOGRAPHICAL NAMES SINCE THE
FIFTH CONFERENCE

Eastern Mediterranean Division (other than Arabic) report
for the period 1987-1992

Submitted by the United Nations Group of Experts
on Geographical Names**

* E/CONF.85/1, Rev.1.

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1. Introduction

This geographical-linguistic Division was set up by the Fifth United Nations Conference on the Standardization of Geographical Names in Montreal in 1987, with the Hebrew language as its linguistic basis. Activities of the Division are of both an intraregional and an interregional nature.

2. Hebrew-language activities

2.1 Romanization

No changes were introduced in the official romanization system for Hebrew initiated in Israel in 1957, and adopted by the Third United Nations Conference on the Standardization of Geographical Names in Athens in 1977. By force of government decree, this system is employed for geographical names by all governmental institutions and agencies, including the Survey of Israel, the national surveying and mapping authority of the State of Israel, which uses it in its maps. However, many users of geographical names, both within the Division and abroad, still employ different conversion methods, mostly by phonetic transcription. Two working papers submitted to the Sixth Conference deal with this matter.

2.2 Donor-recommended exonyms

Normally, exonyms are selected and used by receiver linguistic groups without consulting the donor group or country. While efforts by the United Nations Group of Experts on Geographical Names have led to a reduction in the number of exonyms employed throughout the world, their use cannot, apparently, be totally eliminated. The Eastern Mediterranean Division therefore proposes a new approach to the problem of exonyms, based on the case of Israel. This country has a particularly high number of mainly European exonyms because it donated most of the place names mentioned in the Bible, the latter having been translated into all European and most other languages. A basic donor-recommended list of endonyms is offered for which exonyms could be used as secondary names in other languages. All other place names should then be written in their official endonymic (or, where no official status of a name exists, standardized) form. A working paper on this topic has been submitted to the Sixth Conference.

2.3 Hebrew place names in other geographical-linguistic regions

Besides English, Spanish and French, Hebrew has donated the geographically widest distribution of place names, and indeed of standardized endonyms, in areas outside the countries or linguistic regions in which these languages have official standing. This, again, stems from the wide distribution of the Bible, this book being the basic repertory of Hebrew place names. Many of these names were then given by Christian explorers as well as by colonizers to places all over the world, in all six continents.

A basic list of such biblical place names around the world has been prepared by the Eastern Mediterranean Division, and it is constantly being added to.

3. Inter-divisional cooperation

On the same topic of biblical place names outside the Eastern Mediterranean region, a common research on the history and etymology of biblical place names in South Africa, a member of the Dutch- and German-Speaking Division of the United Nations Group of Experts on Geographical Names, is being conducted by scholars from that country and the Eastern Mediterranean Division.

4. Education and training in toponymy

4.1 National

Courses in toponymy at academic level, which were reported on in the past (see E/CONF.79/L.66 of 16 July 1987), continue at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem.

4.2 International

The Chairman of the Eastern Mediterranean Division took part in organizing, and was due to lecture at, an international training course and Seminar on the Standardization of Geographical Names to be held at the University of Pretoria, South Africa, for participants from southern African countries. This Seminar, to be held under the auspices of the United Nations Group of Experts on Geographical Names and the Human Sciences Research Council of South Africa, will be reported upon separately to the Sixth Conference.

5. Terminology used in the standardization of geographical names

Jerusalem, Israel, was the venue for editing and producing Versions 1.1 and 1.2 of the new Glossary of Toponymic Terminology, commissioned by the United Nations Group of Experts on Geographical Names at its fourteenth session in 1989. The Glossary is being presented to delegates to the Sixth Conference on the Standardization of Geographical Names.
