



United Nations

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SEVENTH UNITED NATIONS CONFERENCE ON STANDARDIZATION

OF GEOGRAPHIC NAMES BEGINS 10-DAY MEETING

NEW YORK, 12 January (Department of Economic and Social Affairs) -- The Seventh United Nations Conference on the Standardization of Geographical Names began its 10-day meeting at Headquarters today.

It will hear reports of governments on progress made in the standardization of names in their countries and regions since the Sixth Conference, held in 1992, as well as of the United Nations Group of Experts on Geographical Names.

Representatives from about 60 countries are expected to attend the Conference. Among the delegates, in addition to some representatives of the permanent missions to the United Nations, are senior officials from national surveying and mapping institutions, as well as representatives of academic and scientific institutions.

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

In the intervening periods, preparatory work for the Conference is carried out by the Group of Experts, established in 1960 at the request of the Economic and Social Council. The most recent meeting of the Group, the nineteenth, was held on Monday, 12 January, with another one-day meeting scheduled to be held on Friday, 23 January, following the conclusion of the Seventh Conference.

The work of the United Nations in the area of toponomy -- the science of naming geographic features -- began in 1959 when a group of geographers and cartographers from several countries suggested to the United Nations that world communications, and hence economic and social development, would benefit from an international standardization of geographical names. The group met several times to define the work on geographical names' standardization, and the United Nations convened the First Conference in 1967, in Geneva. Subsequent conferences have since then been held every five years.

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Geographical names are important as they affect work in areas such as environmental management, sustainable development, peacekeeping operations, cartography, communication, and overall economic and social development. The spelling and application of names of cities, villages, land and water features must be clear, accurate, current, and unambiguous. Effective communication depends on appropriate use of these names on maps, in the media, and in legal documents. Inaccuracy and misrepresentation may lead to inefficiency and misdirection.

Geographical names are sometimes spelled in different ways; one name may be applied to more than one feature; several names may be applied to one feature. Some problems may arise when names are expressed in different writing systems, such as for instance, Arabic, Chinese, Cyrillic, Hebrew and Japanese. Ways of converting these scripts to the Roman alphabet ("romanization") may be many. For instance, map and atlas users might wonder which name is correct, Jenissei, Ienissei, or Yenisey, all used for the same river in Russia.

These are some of the issues the Conference and the Group of Experts work together to clarify and suggest approaches towards acceptable standardization.

The United Nations Conference on the Standardization of Geographical Names is organized and substantively serviced by the Statistics Division of the Department of Economic and Social Affairs.

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