Writing systems (item 15)

74. The Committee accepted the Chairman's proposal that the discussion should be based on the report of the Working Group on a Single Romanization System, as contained in annex IV to the report of the sixth session of the Group of Experts (ESA/RT/C/GN/4) and documents E/CONF.69/L.8, L.11, L.14, L.21, L.23, L.61, L.72, L.74, L.77 and L.92.

75. Mr. Breu (Austria), the Convenor of the Working Group introduced his report as contained in document E/CONF.69/L.77, and the Committee then dealt with individual writing systems and alphabets:

(a) Amharic. No change had been indicated by the Ethiopian Government since the Second Conference;

(b) Arabic. Iran, Saudi Arabia and the Sudan reported that they had accepted the Amended Beirut System of 1972 for the romanization of Arabic, despite some limitations which were pointed out by the Sudan in document E/CONF.69/L.95. Morocco said it would submit a resolution modifying the Amended Beirut System in respect of the diacritics used;

(c) Somali. The Convenor of the Working Group reported that since Somalia had adopted the Roman alphabet in 1973, the question of Somali was no longer a matter of concern to the Working Group;

(d) Greek. Greece reported that studies had been carried out, in conjunction with Cyprus, on a system for the romanization of Greek. Because of the complexities of the many aspects of the problem, a final proposal was not yet ready to be placed before the Committee. Work would, however, continue and it was anticipated that a system would be drawn up in time for the next meeting of the Group of Experts. The representative of Cyprus agreed fully with the statement made by Greece;

(e) Bulgarian. Bulgaria reported that they would be submitting a resolution that would amend and replace part of resolution 5 of the Second Conference; 14/

(f) Mongolian. Mr. Földi (Hungary) reported that since there had been no further information from the Mongolian Academy of Sciences, the situation remained as it had been at the time of the Second Conference;

(g) Korean. Mr. Földi (Hungary) reported that there was a romanization system officially used in the People's Democratic Republic of Korea. It was also reported that the Ministry of Education system was officially used in the Republic of Korea for road signs, railway station names and small-scale maps. The McCune-Reischauer system was also widely used for the romanization of Korean names. In view of the existence of those three systems of romanization for the same alphabet, it was suggested that no action should be taken at the Third Conference;

(h) Burmese. No change was reported on the situation of the romanization of Burmese since the time of the Second Conference;

14/ Second United Nations Conference on the Standardization of Geographical Names, vol. I ..., p. 11.

(i) Maldivian. No changes had been noted since the Second Conference;

(j) Non-Roman alphabets of the USSR. The USSR referred to document E/CONF.69/L.21 and explained that the systems described in the paper were under study in the USSR. Geographical names on maps and in atlases had been romanized according to the USSR Academy of Sciences (1951-1956) system, which would continue to be used for the time being. It was anticipated that a single romanization system would be produced by the end of 1977 or mid-1978. The new system would then be available for appraisal by the Group of Experts;

(k) Hebrew. No change had taken place in the romanization of Hebrew geographical names since the adoption of resolution 9 at the Second Conference; 15/

(l) Cyrillic alphabets of Yugoslavia. Yugoslavia reported that it would be submitting a resolution, based on document E/CONF.69/L.87, which would elaborate on resolution 6 of the Second Conference; 16/

(m) Japanese. There had been no new developments since the Second Conference. The representative of Japan said he did not expect that a single system of romanization could be adopted, but the Kunrei system would be preferred to other systems because it was more in conformity with the phonetic structure of the Japanese language;

(n) Khmer. No change had been noted since the adoption of resolution 10 at the Second Conference; 17/

(o) Laotian. No change had been reported since the time of the Second Conference;

(p) Persian. Iran summarized the results of three meetings of the Asia, South-West division aimed at minimizing existing differences in the transliteration of Persian. Those would be reported in detail to the Group of Experts for further study;

(q) Thai. No change had been noted since the adoption of resolution 14 at the First Conference; 18/

(r) Chinese. China submitted a draft resolution on the romanization of Chinese geographical names for consideration by the Committee. After a lengthy discussion during which China explained the extensive use of the Chinese Phonetic Alphabet (Pinyin) in China today, it was generally agreed that Pinyin should be adopted as the international system for the romanization of Chinese geographical names. It was also agreed that there would be a limited period of transition, after the introduction of Pinyin, during which time existing systems would also have to

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15/ Ibid., p. 12.

16/ Ibid., p. 11.

17/ Ibid., p. 12.

18/ United Nations Conference on the Standardization of Geographical Names, vol. I. ..., p. 13.

be used. An addition to the draft resolution proposed by the United States of America and the United Kingdom on the basis of document E/CONF.69/L.129 was rejected by the Committee and the draft resolution as submitted by China was recommended for adoption by the Conference with amendments;

(s) Pashto and Dari. Afghanistan reported that a system of romanization for Pashto and Dari had been adopted by Pashto Academy (see document E/CONF.69/L.86). The romanizations that appeared on old maps were no longer used, and the new system would be applied henceforth. Pakistan stated that they would like to continue with the present Hunterian system, which had been found satisfactory and should be accepted for the transliteration of Pashto and Dari geographical names in Pakistan;

(t) Languages of the Indian division. India would submit a resolution that would correct some misprints and give some amendments in the tables of transliteration of the languages of India published in the report of the Second Conference 19/ and would add a note to the table for Tamil. Bangladesh and Pakistan stated that they would need to study some of the tables further within the Indian division.

76. In reply to a statement made by the delegate of Malaysia on the unacceptability of the international boundary between China and Malaysia as shown in the Atlas of the People's Republic of China (1977) the Chairman made a clarifying statement that the Conference was concerned only with the standardization of geographical names. Other matters, such as international boundaries, should therefore be disregarded, and that matter was agreed upon. The Chinese delegation agreed with the Chairman's statement and pointed out that at the Conference China had circulated copies of the Atlas of the People's Republic of China in the Chinese phonetic spelling, with a view to providing material on geographical names in the Pinyin system; it was not for the Conference to take any decision on that Atlas. There were grounds for the delineation of China's international boundary as shown in the Atlas of the People's Republic of China. It had always been maintained that if disagreements existed on the question of boundaries between neighbouring countries, a reasonable solution should be sought through friendly consultations.

Action by the Conference

77. In connexion with the work of Committee IV the Conference adopted resolutions on the romanization of Chinese geographical names (resolution 8); the romanization of Arabic characters (resolution 9); the Bulgarian Cyrillic alphabet (resolution 10); the Serbo-Croatian and the Macedonian Cyrillic alphabets of Yugoslavia (resolution 11); the transliteration into Roman and Devanagari scripts of the languages of the Indian division (resolution 12); the romanization of the Hebrew alphabet (resolution 13); and the single romanization system for each non-roman writing system (resolution 25).

19/ Second United Nations Conference on the Standardization of Geographical Names, vol. II, Technical Papers (United Nations publication, Sales No. E.74.I.4), pp. 117-162.