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UNITED NATIONS SERIES OF GAZETTEERS

AUTOMATED DATA PROCESSING

Report on International Gazetteers

Paper presented by the Working Group on International  
Gazetteers of the United Nations Group of Experts  
on Geographical Names

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In the five years which have passed since the Third United Nations Conference on the Standardization of Geographical Names, the UN Group of Experts has reviewed the possibilities of producing a concise gazetteer of the world. At the eighth meeting of UNGEGN, the political aspects were touched upon, but primary attention was devoted to technical problems involving questions relating to the internal administrative divisions of nations and the linguistic aspects of geographical names for the gazetteer. A further point of discussion concerned the accuracy of geographical co-ordinates which it might be possible to give in such a gazetteer.

This last point had been discussed at the First United Nations Conference in Geneva and repeatedly since. Certain countries are strongly opposed to disclosing the geographical positions of named places to the order of accuracy which other countries believe to be absolutely essential for the purposes of positive identification, namely to one minute of arc in terms of latitude and longitude. In areas where names occur in close proximity, such precision is necessary to give the correct orientation and position of places relative one to another. The counter argument was that such precision could only be required for military purposes and, in any case, national policy prohibited the release of such precise co-ordinate information.

Recommendation 4E (National Gazetteers) of the First UN Conference specifically states that a gazetteer should include "such information as is necessary for the proper location and identification of the named features. In particular, it is recommended that the following be included:

- (a) the kind of feature to which the name applies
- (b) precise description of the location and the extent, including a point position reference if possible, of each named feature."

On the linguistic aspects, the absence of United Nations approved systems for the romanization of geographical names precluded the compilation of such a gazetteer. Only a few systems have so far been agreed for the romanization of geographical names for United Nations use in the whole period from the First Conference in 1967 up to the present time. Several rival systems are in use in the world for various purposes. In certain areas the linguistic problems have yet to be resolved. In other areas more than one national system for writing geographical names exists, hindering the selection of one particular system.

Administrative divisions and national terminology were additional matters of great complexity when viewed on a world-wide basis, but there was also the question of territorial disputes to which further reference will be made below.

The eighth meeting of UNGEGN decided to take a few sample areas and assess the technical problems involved in carrying out a trial compilation. This work was duly executed and presented to the ninth meeting of UNGEGN in February 1981.

The results of the trial confirmed fully the doubts which had been expressed and demonstrated, as only a trial compilation can, the technical difficulties involved. There was, however, the additional question of the political aspects involved in gazetteer production. This was discussed fully at the ninth meeting of UNGEGN.

It had been evident from time to time in the meetings of UNGEGN and at the three Conferences held respectively in Geneva (1967), London (1972) and Athens (1977), that where territories are in dispute the parties to the dispute generally refuse to accept any publication - map, document, or book - which does not support their individual territorial claim to the exclusion of all others. In the period following the Athens Conference this had become increasingly clear. In such circumstances the production of an acceptable world gazetteer, especially one produced under United Nations auspices, appeared to be an unattainable goal and it was so agreed at the ninth meeting of UNGEGN in 1981. The Group of Experts agreed that the production of such gazetteers was more appropriate to individual publishers, particularly in the atlas publishing field.

The Chairman of the Working Group on Gazetteers undertook the study of existing atlases with the object of acquainting the present Conference as to which atlases contained index-gazetteers comprising sufficient names to meet the broad requirements of the United Nations gazetteer envisaged.

As criteria, the Chairman considered atlases which were not more than five years old and which included geographical co-ordinates as well as plate/grid identifiers. It must be stated that there are precious few. To be exact only two are known to the Chairman, namely:

- (a) Rand McNally: The New International Atlas, 1980, containing 160,000 names
- (b) The Times Atlas of the World, Comprehensive Edition, 1980, containing over 200,000 names.

There are several smaller atlases with 60,000 names or fewer, but otherwise complying with the requirements for latitude and longitude. These atlases would adequately meet the requirement for a world gazetteer of smaller compass, a proposal sometimes made at UNGEGN meetings.

For those who require very detailed references to geographical names, the Conference is reminded of the United States Board on Geographic Names gazetteers, which provide extensive coverage but extend to a great many volumes.