

**Twenty-sixth meeting of the United Nations Group of Experts on
Geographical Names
Vienna, 2-6 May 2011**

**WELCOME STATEMENT OF MS. MAZLAN OTHMAN,
DEPUTY DIRECTOR-GENERAL OF THE
UNITED NATIONS OFFICE AT VIENNA**

**Madame Chair,
Distinguished Delegates and Observers,
Ladies and Gentlemen,**

It is a great pleasure for me, as the Deputy Director General of the United Nations Office at Vienna and Director of the Vienna-based United Nations Office for Outer Space Affairs, to welcome you to the Twenty-sixth meeting of the United Nations Group of Experts on Geographical Names.

Although I personally have never had the opportunity of participating and contributing to UNGEGN meetings, colleagues in my office have done so, as space-based information is a vital subset of geospatial information in the same way as geographic names. I was impressed to learn that it was as early as June 1960 that the first meeting of an Expert Group on Geographical Names was called at UN Headquarters in New York.

Allow me then to congratulate this body for a history of over fifty-years of serving the Economic and Social Council of the United Nations and the global community at large.

Madame Chair, distinguished delegates,

In this modern world of the internet and of global interconnectedness, where no place is no longer ‘far away’, your work, as an expert body advising the Economic and Social Council on standardization of geographical names, is of fundamental importance for local, national and global sustainable planning, for environmental management, for trade, for tourism, for global communication, for the preservation of cultural heritage and for security operations and peace-keeping. There is no doubting that everyone needs clear and unambiguous maps and names!

Geographical names matter greatly: Recent natural disasters from the earthquakes in Haiti and Chile to the Tsunami in Japan have sadly reminded us that effective delivery of humanitarian assistance depends crucially on clear and well documented place names.

In our daily work at the UN Office for Outer Space Affairs, we come to appreciate the value of standardized geographic names and denominations. For example, the Office implements the United Nations Platform for Space-based Information for Disaster Management and Emergency Response - UN-SPIDER. In this context and as mentioned earlier, the accuracy of geographic names is crucial in supporting preparedness and relief efforts to major natural or technological disasters, in particular when bridging existing gaps between the space community and the disaster management communities.

Madame Chair, distinguished delegates,

I understand that 9 United Nations Conferences on Standardization of Geographical Names have been organized and this UN Expert Group on Geographical Names has held 25 meetings. I also understand that the foundation of your work is done in 23 linguistic and geographical divisions and 10 substantive working groups. So it is apparent that over the past half-century your professional community has been able to create an impressive network and body of work, in this highly specialized but important and relevant field.

A glance at the agenda of this meeting shows that work is still ongoing. Moreover, in an increasing globalized world, new challenges are being added continuously to your agenda, especially through the fast evolution of information technology, which offers tremendous opportunities, but also poses great challenges, as the size of user community needing accurate and timely geographical information has increased exponentially.

The area of standardization of geographical names may be a highly specialized area and not necessarily make the world's daily headlines. Nonetheless, it is in my view a fine example of how the "United Nations" truly functions: Experts and stakeholders in a particular field from around the world gather under the UN umbrella to exchange their knowledge and experience, to learn from each other and to find common solutions to new global challenges.

In this sense, I am honored, as the representative of the United Nations Secretary-General, to, once again, welcome you here in Vienna.

I wish you a fruitful and successful, but also enjoyable session here in Vienna. Thank you very much for your attention.