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THIRD UNITED NATIONS CONFERENCE ON THE  
STANDARDIZATION OF GEOGRAPHICAL NAMES

Athens, Greece

17 August - 7 September 1977

Item 7 of the agenda

REPORT BY BANGLADESH

Bangladesh is for the first time participating in the United Nations Conference on the Standardization of Geographical Names.

It is inherent in the nature of every human being that he likes to be called or identified by his name - by his exact name - the name that remains unaltered or undistorted when pronounced by others in their languages. Likewise every nation in the world desires that the places or distinct geographical features of his country are known to others by the names the country has given, and that others should accept these names. This is equally applicable to every nation in the world, small or big, developed or underdeveloped. In the past, this intention was not amply demonstrated, but with the democratic principles upheld under the United Nations Charter even smaller nations do demand this right and thus these sentiments have given rise to this United Nations conference on this subject.

The problem of standardization of geographical names for every country is both at home and abroad. At home, it is in the sense that where a country has more than one lingua franca, for the sake of uniformity within the framework of one nation or one country, the problem of identifying a place or a geographical feature by one name (if not, the unique name) comes up. Abroad, it is in the sense that the geographical names must be written in foreign countries in their languages so that these names are pronounced with least distortion. On both of these fronts the problems are acute.

In a country where the lingua franca is one, such as in Bangladesh, the problem is not that acute on the home front. When the British were in India, many places and geographical features in the area now known as Bangladesh, were given English names. In many cases, these English names are not the exact names, but slightly distorted. These now have the status of exonyms. With the passage of time these exonyms have also become very popular, though their exact and true names are still there very much alive. It is quite in fitness of things that these exonyms are done away with and replaced by the exact names spelled correctly in any foreign language. Of course, the exact names cannot be absolutely or correctly transliterated in foreign languages but very satisfactory approximations can be worked out, though with difficulties.

In publishing standard maps on the primary 1:50,000 scale in our country, official surveyors visit the area or the place and collect the names from the local people and accept the ones spelled in Bangla corroborated in writing by a member of the local Union Council. This name thus derived gets more or less an official status because the Union Council is the basic administrative set up. Since Bangla is a rich language, there is no difficulty in getting names of every place authenticated this way. The English version of these names is done under the direct supervision of a superintendent of survey who is an officer of higher authority, and is well acquainted with the process of transliteration, if not a simple conversion. These maps thus prepared go under the scrutiny of Directors and ultimately under the authority of the Surveyor General of Bangladesh, get published. Although no gazetteer of geographical names (that is to say, national gazetteer) is either compiled or published, the original records of the surveyors are preserved for quite some time as a reference or evidence in Survey of Bangladesh.

The Department of Hydrography of Bangladesh Inland Water Transport Authority under the Ministry of Communications, deals with all kinds of hydrographic survey of inland and coastal waters of Bangladesh and is responsible for the publication of nautical charts. While publishing the nautical charts, the Department of Hydrography, in collaboration with the Survey of Bangladesh, puts the geographical names for the maritime features in their charts.