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SEVENTH UNITED NATIONS CONFERENCE ON STANDARDIZATION

OF GEOGRAPHIC NAMES CONCLUDES

NEW YORK, 27 January (Department of Economic and Social Affairs) -- The Seventh United Nations Conference on the Standardization of Geographical Names concluded its 10-day meeting last week after adopting 15 resolutions.

By these resolutions, the Conference calls, among others, for a review and improvement of the "Amended Beirut System of 1972" for the romanization of the Arab script, since certain inconsistencies of the current romanization system are repeatedly causing inconvenience and uncertainty about the romanized form of Arab geographical names.

It requests the establishment of an archive for the documents created in 30 years of work in geographical names standardization. It recommends the usage of current local forms of geographical names that are collected through field work rather than through evaluation of maps and other documents.

The Conference also expresses support for the need to have cooperation and sponsorships from the commercial sector in the activities of the United Nations Group of Experts on Geographical Names, and to pursue opportunities in underwriting the costs for countries to have their own programme for the standardization of geographical names.

The Conference, held once every five years, seeks to reduce alternative names for the same places around the world, as well as to simplify and standardize such names. In the intervening period, preparatory work for the Conference is carried out by the Group of Experts. The work of the United Nations in the area of toponymy -- the science of naming geographic features -- began in 1959.

The recently concluded Conference, held from 13 to 22 January, heard 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 Group of Experts.

A total of 184 representatives and observers from 64 countries attended the Conference, where 134 papers were presented. Among the delegates, in addition to some representatives of the permanent missions to the United Nations, were senior officials from national surveying and mapping

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institutions, as well as representatives of academic and scientific institutions. There was notably better representation by countries from Africa, Latin America and Central and Eastern Europe. Of particular note was the first-time involvement of the International Organization of Standardization (ISO).

The Conference was informed of the spectacular development and possibilities opened up by the Internet. Many countries are already using this medium for communication, information and exchange of data (gazetteers, databases, toponymic guidelines, training material) at different levels of accessibility. The use of this technology will be encouraged by a new data exchange format and standard adopted at the Conference for international use.

A publication, Country Names, listing the official endonymic forms of their names, as well as the names in English, French and Spanish, was tabled at the Conference. This publication will serve as a necessary reference work to show the correct written form of names of 193 countries.

A special meeting was held during the Conference to commemorate the 30 years of progress since the First Conference, held in 1967. Tribute was paid to toponymists of historical significance, such as Ptolemy, Nasser Khosrow, Istakhri and Ibn Battutah, as well as the founding members of the United Nations Group of Experts and modern toponymists.

The Conference identified a number of challenges for the future, including the development of needed transliteration systems and ways of obtaining a more active participation from developing countries. In general, these countries lack the necessary toponymic infrastructure which is of great importance for their economic development and social welfare.

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.

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.