

**Ninth United Nations Conference on the  
Standardization of Geographical Names**

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Item 4 of the provisional agenda\*

**Reports by Governments on the situation in their countries  
and on the progress made in the standardization of  
geographical names since the Eighth Conference**

**Geographical Names Situation Report – Sri Lanka**

Submitted by Sri Lanka\*\*

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\*\* Prepared by S.M.W. Fernando, Additional Surveyor General, Sri Lanka Survey Department.

**Geographical Names**  
**Situation Report – Sri Lanka**  
By S.M.W. Fernando. Additional Surveyor General

**Introduction**

Sri Lanka is an island in the Indian Ocean extending from the southern tip of India having an area of 65,610 sq.km, with a large number of smaller islands around the main land, and having a population of over 19 million. Sri Lanka can claim a long history of civilization based on irrigation and agriculture over 2500 years.

Geographical Names play an important role in Sri Lanka too as in any other country, in terms of historical, cultural, economical, administrative, ethnic, religious and linguistics points of view. Sri Lanka is a country which name has been changed from ‘Sinhala’ to ‘Ceylon’ in English or ‘Lankawa’ in Sinhalese during the British colonial period. Since the country gained independence in 1948 the name was changed again to the present name, ‘Sri Lanka’ in 1972.

According to historical records Sri Lanka was divided into regional units and that village boundaries were established for the entire country. However old maps with above details are not available. Most significantly the available earliest map of Sri Lanka was prepared by Claudius Ptolemy in 150 A.D. Ptolemy named Sri Lanka as Taprobane. The Portuguese (1505 – 1658 A.D.) and the Dutch (1658-1796 A.D.) had prepared many maps of Sri Lanka during their administration.

The Survey Department being the National Survey and Mapping Organisation established in 1800 by the British administration, has established a geodetic control network and completed the one inch to one mile map series in 1924. It contains all the geographical names that are in practical use at the time of preparation of the map series in respect of place/village names, natural or man made topographical features, administrative areas etc. There are 72 maps in this series.

After Sri Lanka converted itself into the metric system of measurements in 1982, a new topographic map series was published on the scale of 1: 50,000. This was basically a metric version of former 1” series with up to date information collected from Aerial Photographs or from field verification. There are 92 map sheets in this series. The first edition of this series was completed in mid 1990s, and second edition is in progress.

Sri Lanka is also in the process of preparation another series of topographic maps on a larger scale of 1: 10,000. A little over 45% of the series has been completed and 15% is on different stages of production.

Sri Lanka is one of the participant countries in the Global Mapping programme organized by the International Steering Committee for Global Mapping and a small scale data set of Sri Lanka is available in the ISCGM web site.

We have published a National Atlas in 1988, and the second edition of the Atlas will be published before end of this year.

Recently the department has commenced the Cadastral map series on the scale of 1: 2000.

With regard to the Geographical Names, A Gazetteer has been prepared in the office of Geography, Department of the Interior, Washington, D.C in June 1960 containing official standard names approved by the United States Board on Geographic Names, as well as unapproved variant names. This gazetteer contains about 29,600 entries for places and features in the country, based on 1" map series. It also contains a glossary of generic terms of Sinhalese and Tamil words.

There is another publication called 'Village List' available on Provincial basis used mainly for cadastral purposes. These lists contain the Village Names with their reference to the cadastral index map and to the administrative divisions.

The Department has digitized the entire 92 maps in the 1:50,000 map series and created a topographic vector database for GIS applications and Digital Mapping. This database is designed to contain many layers, where 'PLACES', 'ADMIN' and 'HYDRO' layers contain the names as an attribute.

This database has been used to create a digital Gazetteer of PLACES that contains the names and coordinates of places.

### **Issues**

The country has many different types of geographical names.

- Names of the different levels of administrative divisions.

- Names of Natural and man made geographical features like Islands, Reservoirs, Tanks, Lagoons, Lakes, Streams etc.
- Names of Villages, Places, Peaks, Estates, Trig Stations.
- Names of Land Parcels.
- Names of Roads, Lanes & Paths

The names have been generated by one of the three main languages in use, namely Sinhalese, Tamil or English. The standardization of geographical names is a complicated issue in some cases where certain place names are spelt and pronounced differently in different languages mentioned above.

### **Recommendations**

To establish an authority called ‘**National Geographical Names Authority**’ comprising of Names Experts, Historians, Academics, Geographers, Administrators, Surveyors, Cartographers, and Planners, in order to address these issues and to resolve the problems that can arise in standardizing the geographical names. This should be similar to the National Atlas Committee headed by the Surveyor General.

References :

National Atlas of Sri Lanka.

Wijesinghe, S.K. 2004, Situation Report – Sri Lanka