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Tenth United Nations Conference on the Standardization of Geographical Names

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Item 10 of the provisional agenda*
Exonyms

Standardization of exonyms and the principles of freedom of expression and the safeguarding of cultural diversity

Submitted by France**

Summary***

The interest that people take in the etymology of the words they use is no less essential than the standardization of those words. In toponymy, this public interest combined with the technical needs of geographical information managers gave rise in 1967 to the United Nations Conferences on the Standardization of Geographical Names and the United Nations Group of Experts on Geographical Names.

However, the work of these bodies, particularly in the matter of exonyms, has sometimes seemed to focus on standardization without any regard for certain major principles whose legal value sets them right at the top of the hierarchy of standards. In particular, international standardization cannot run counter to freedom of expression (Article 1 of the Charter of the United Nations, article 19 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, articles 2 and 19 of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights) and the safeguarding of the intangible cultural heritage in its diversity (Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of 17 October 2003 and the Convention on the Protection and Promotion of the Diversity of Cultural Expressions of 20 October 2005). Moreover, the definition of international standardization given by the Second United Nations Conference on the Standardization of Geographical Names in resolution II/31 is fully in keeping with these principles if it is understood in the sense of “one name per place and per language”, but not if it is construed as “one name per place irrespective of language”.

* E/CONF.101/1.

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*** The full report is available in the language of submission only from <http://unstats.un.org/unsd/geoinfo/UNGEGN/ungegnConf10.html>.



To reconcile these aims, it is important to standardize different uses in different ways. The use of toponyms in a linguistic context is a matter of freedom of expression and in no case of standardization; hence it can be addressed only by way of grammar. Standardization can relate only to uses outside any context and these uses may serve different functions, particularly in the international arena; it may not be wise to choose automatically one language rather than another for these functions; then again, there must be a linkage between place name use in and out of context.
