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**REPORT BY THE CHAIRMAN OF THE WORKING GROUP ON TOPONYMIC DATA FILES  
AND GAZETTEERS**

Prepared by H.A.G. Lewis, United Kingdom



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TOPONYMIC DATA FILES AND GAZETTEERS

(Prepared by H.A.G. Lewis, United Kingdom)

I have spent the first part of the period since our last session in New York engaged in field surveying and digital mapping in the Middle East. The work included an intensive programme of field collection and office processing of names as well as construction of a data-base suitable for both digital mapping and the production of names lists and ultimately gazetteers. Of great importance to this particular programme was the task of dealing with generic terms. Ascertaining their precise meaning can be extremely difficult due to the many possible variations in their use, coupled with the scarcity of informants with personal knowledge of the ground.

Experts at this session will be conscious of the impact of events in eastern Europe and the former USSR. Changes in political status have introduced changes in the writing systems and, therefore, in the treatment of geographical names in the Roman alphabet. There have been, in addition, actual changes in the names themselves. All those factors have intensified my own interest in the numerous minority languages of the Russian Federation and the languages of the other countries which have emerged as a result of the break-up of the USSR.

At the ICA Conference in Cologne/Köln, I was able to have a number of private discussions on matters involving geographical names. An item of particular interest was the latest exciting developments in the digital recording of Japanese characters. Further developments and applications will be watched with great interest.

More recently, I had the good fortune to be able to attend a conference in China on minority languages. This provided an opportunity to discuss, at first hand, the complex issues which arise in a province with some 25 nationalities.

Generally speaking, geographical names remain in a realm of mystery to most people. From time to time, interest is aroused when a particular name or group of names features in the news but ordinarily few are acquainted or wish to be acquainted with the complexities of the subject. Many regard geographical names as an unavoidable nuisance and among those of that opinion are a majority of the people engaged in mapping. Speaking from past experience, it is the people responsible for the making of maps who need above all to be convinced of the advantages to be gained from devoting more effort to the study of geographical names. They need to be persuaded of the benefits in terms of finance and human effort in getting names right in the first place and the consequences of not doing so. They are, in most cases, the source of or the advocates of the funds needed to provide the personnel and equipment required for

respect, digital cartography has proved to be a worthy ally. It must have access to a reliable names data-base. There is, however, always the danger that the names data-base will be limited to the demands of digital mapping. The character of the names data-base must undergo a change in passing from digital mapping to a geographic information system (GIS). In a GIS, names have to be common across a wide range of applications. Administrative, postal, geographic, industrial, utilities and property data must move towards a single set of toponyms. Embarking on a GIS is the first step towards bringing toponyms before the public at large.

Apart from this inevitable attention to geographic names, obtaining publicity is more a matter of taking advantage of opportunities as they present themselves.

I have had a few opportunities to engage in some publicity on geographical names. I recorded a 45-minute interview on the subject for Mexican Television. Shortly afterwards I was involved in a video of about the same length on Islamic mapping from earliest times. Unfortunately, due to the amount of subject matter, those aspects which affected geographical names were omitted. In addition, I have been involved in some radio and television programmes.

Throughout the whole of the period I have been involved in map and atlas production which has included problems associated with indexing of names and their cross-referencing.