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UNITED NATIONS GROUP OF EXPERTS ON GEOGRAPHICAL NAMES

CONCLUDES TWENTIETH SESSION

NEW YORK, 28 January (Department of Economic and Social Affairs) -- The twentieth session of the United Nations Group of Experts on Geographical Names concluded its meeting at United Nations Headquarters this week.

From 17 to 28 January some 150 experts on place names from United Nations Member States met in New York to address programmes which implement national and international standardization of geographical names. The work of the Group of Experts promotes consistent use worldwide of accurate place names.

Consistent use of accurate place names, which is an essential element of effective communication worldwide, was addressed by technical working groups whose main aim is to promote the standardization and dissemination of correct written name forms as they are nationally recognized.

Activities of the meeting were additionally directed towards addressing the outcomes and resolutions of previous United Nations Conferences on the Standardization of Geographical Names and planning for the Eighth United Nations Conference on the Standardization of Geographical Names and the twenty-first session of the Group of Experts to be held in Berlin in 2002.

The significance of the work carried out by the Group of Experts is illustrated in a new brochure launched at the twentieth session. This brochure -- "Consistent use of Place Names" -- explains how national programmes to standardize names may benefit trade, conservation and socio-economic planning, as well as promote peace among nations.

An important advancement in the work of place name experts in recent years has been the development of electronic data bases and gazetteers, many of which can now be accessed through the Internet. Over 25 place name Web sites were mentioned by experts at the twentieth session and it was agreed that the development of a Web site for the Group of Experts in the near future is essential not only to provide links to a growing number of place name Web sites, but also to help promote the correct use of place names through wider access to gazetteers, toponymic guidelines and information about toponymic training courses.

A report on "Place Names -- The Memory of Places", the theme of the European Heritage Days in Finland in 1999, demonstrated the way in which place names can, for all of us, help to improve our mutual understanding of cultural heritage and the key role it can play in our search for cultural identity.

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Also, there was a report on the production of a new educational CD-ROM, showing how place names can be used as a window on the world. Geographical names as a key element of a digital atlas was also demonstrated.

The excellent work that continues to be undertaken by some countries was demonstrated during the twentieth session of the Group of Experts. However, it was noted that a gap was growing between countries with respect to the implementation of programmes for standardizing geographical names. To assist in rectifying this situation, the Government of Germany in hosting the next standardization conference in Berlin in 2002 will be arranging, prior to the Conference, a toponymic training course especially for the developing countries.

The technical exhibition planned for the eighth Conference will demonstrate the importance of geographical names in every day activities and how the variety and diversity of languages and cultures around the world requires a standardized approach to place naming.

The United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs, Statistics Division, provides secretariat services to the Group of Experts and its sessions, as well as to the United Nations Conferences on the Standardization of Geographical Names.

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