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Item 8 of the provisional agenda

**Implementation of resolutions and activities relating to the Working Group
on Evaluation and Implementation**

**The Establishment of a Geographical Names Authority for
the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan
and
Activities Performed with Respect to Geographical Names and
Cartography in the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan^{*}**

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The Establishment of a Geographical Names Authority
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A paper proposed for presentation to the 25th Session of the United Nations Group of Experts on Geographical Names, under provisional agenda item 8. This paper addresses progress on fully implementing United Nations Conference on the Standardization of Geographical Names resolution I/4, National Standardization.

Abstract:

Leaders of three important Afghan government agencies, the Afghan Geodesy & Cartography Head Office (AGCHO), the Central Statistics Office (CSO), and the Independent Directorate of Local Governance (IDLG) have agreed to work together to establish a Board on Geographic Names for Afghanistan (BGN-A). They are preparing a regulation to present to the First Vice President of Afghanistan asking him to establish the BGN-A.

First I would like to sincerely thank the United Nations Group of Experts on Geographical Names (UNGEGN) for welcoming an expert from Afghanistan to this session, held in the beautiful city of Nairobi.

Attending this session, following our participation in the Eighth Regional Meeting for Standardization of Geographic Names of the United Nations Asia South-West Division, in Tehran, Iran in May 2008 is another step of great importance in the reconstruction and rehabilitation of Afghanistan after decades of violence.

Collecting and cataloging geographical names is a very important part of rebuilding our economy, preserving our diverse cultures, and respecting the sacredness of our religion. It is also a critical part of providing quality cartographic products to our defense, security, public safety, and civilian agencies to help them lead in the rebuilding of our country.

I also want to make the members of UNGEGN aware that the President of Afghanistan decreed in July 2007 that AGCHO has sole responsibility for all Geodesy Cartography, and Cadastral activities in Afghanistan. This also means that it is the sole authority for the collection and cataloging of geographical names for the use of Afghans and the world.

However, there have been other agencies of our government that have collected geographical names for their purposes. These agencies include the CSO, Ministry of Interior (MOI), Ministry of Agriculture, and the Independent Directorate of Local Governance (IDLG). This is additional evidence of the importance of geographical names in establishing good

government and how important it is that there be a geographical names standardization authority for Afghanistan that will address the concerns of all its government agencies and citizens.

With that in mind, the leaders of AGCHO, CSO, and IDLG met in December 2008 and agreed to work together to propose the BGN-A. So far that meeting and two more planning meetings in January and March 2009 have been held. All three parties agree that given its authority over cartography in Afghanistan, AGCHO should be the permanent chairperson of the BGN-A. The immediate task before this group is drafting a regulation to propose to the First Vice President of Afghanistan who would establish the BGN-A and its authority. Their first act will be to make one list of names from the many lists that exist in various ministries and agencies.

The BGN-A, once established, will have an executive committee and a technical committee. The executive committee will be made up of the General President of AGCHO as BGN-A chairperson, and the general presidents of CSO and IDLG. They will task the technical committee with specific geographical names requirements. They will meet quarterly and deliver an annual report to the First Vice President of Afghanistan on their progress and plans for the future.

The executive committee will create a technical committee and appoint its members from numerous government agencies with an interest in geographical names, starting with employees of AGCHO, CSO and IDLG. Other agencies will be added to the technical committee when suited. This committee will determine what geographical names projects must be accomplished based on the direction provided by the executive committee, and their own judgment. This committee will work with AGCHO toponymists to complete these projects.

When the technical committee completes a project they will present it to the executive committee for their approval. When it is approved, the decision will be announced through government channels to the various ministries, agencies, provinces and districts for implementation.

The current geographical names database for Afghanistan is maintained and will continue to be maintained by AGCHO toponymists. AGCHO will have responsibility for funding BGN-A projects.

Afghanistan is rebuilding a professional geographical names tradition. This history goes back to 1960 when AGCHO conducted a significant field collection of geographical names.

From 1957-1959 the United States and the former Soviet Union collected aerial photographs of all of Afghanistan. Those photographs were collected and used by Technoexport of the former Soviet Union and Fairchild Aerial Surveys of the United States to compile 1:50,000 – 1:250,000 scale maps of Afghanistan. But geographical place names were still needed to complete the maps.

In early 1960 AGCHO sent approximately 35 teams to all corners of Afghanistan by car, horse, camel, and foot to collect geographical names and record map revisions. These names were added to the new maps.

More recently, in order to be prepared to conduct parliamentary elections in 2004, the election commission and the MOI asked AGCHO to compile a list of all Afghan villages and record the district and province of each village. The MOI sent orders to each provincial governor instructing that they cooperate with AGCHO. As a result of this work, a number of lists of villages were collected from provincial governors and district leaders.

AGCHO sent teams to each provincial capital where they met in a conference with the governor and leaders of the districts of that province. Each district leader was told to bring their village list to the conference. The AGCHO teams collected these lists and returned to AGCHO headquarters where the names were put into a database.

The teams collected geographical names for 48,757 villages, 364 districts, and 34 provinces.

The improvement of geographical place names in Afghanistan continues. It plays a key role in our governance from elections, to basic public services, statistical data compilation, economic aid, security and defense, and public safety, among others responsibilities of government. It is one of those invisible functions people forget until they need it. It is part of our foundation for recovery.

I would also like to report that in July, 2006, AGCHO and CSO sponsored, with assistance from the United States (US) Geological Survey (USGS) and the US Agency for International Development (USAID) led a conference to begin instituting the National Spatial Data Infrastructure (NSDI). A three-day workshop, attended by over 170 people, representing over 50 organizations from the Government of the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan (GIROA), international aid organizations, security and support agencies, non-governmental organizations, and institutes of higher education.

The Program Coordination Office (PCO) was established to manage the ASDI and the ASDI Initiation Committee was established to drive the program as a matter of national priority throughout the GIROA with the help of key partner agencies and institutions. The members of the committee are:

- AGCHO
- CSO
- MOI
- Ministry of Agriculture
- Ministry of Justice
- UN Population Fund
- USGS
- US National Geospatial-Intelligence Agency
- Agency Coordination Body for Afghan Relief
- Academy of Sciences of Afghanistan (ASA)
- Kabul University

The Executive Oversight Committee (EOC) was also established. It is co-chaired by AGCHO and CSO and provides oversight and guidance to the ASDI Program. It also has decision authority over all policy and financial matters. The members of the EOC include (and may be expanded), approximately 40 ministries and agencies; coalition security forces; UN, technical support and donor agencies; and private sector leaders.

There is also a Technical Oversight Committee, chaired by the ASDI PCO, includes all of the coordinators and technical leads from all of the organizations already mentioned. It provides technical guidance and oversight, and works together to discuss and resolve technical issues.

This program is now called the Afghanistan Spatial Data Infrastructure (ASDI) and held its second workshop in August 2008.

I am also pleased to report that the national atlas of Afghanistan and its provinces is under revision. The revision will be conducted by the GIROA and Federal Republic of Germany, and managed by the following committees: supervising, planning, scientific, technical, and editing. There is also a working group. Members of those committees have been drawn from AGCHO, Kabul University, ASA, and professors from German universities.

The contents of the atlas will include: a general map and provincial maps, as well as physical, population, economic, natural resources, and transportation maps of Afghanistan.

The new atlas is 30 percent complete and is scheduled to be ready for printing by the end of 2010.

Finally, I am proud to make you aware that Afghanistan is the 152nd country to join the Global Mapping Project. We look forward to making a meaningful contribution to this important initiative.