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Geographical Names Experts Meeting in Vienna Stress the Need to Standardize Place Names for the Benefit of the Wider Community

26th Session of the United Nations Group of Experts on Geographical Names Vienna International Centre, Vienna, 6 May 2011

VIENNA, 6 May (UN Information Service) – On 6 May 2011 the 26th Session of the United Nations Group of Experts on Geographical Names (UNGEGN) drew to a close at the Vienna International Centre in Austria. A total of 170 geographical names experts from 20 of the 23 linguistic/geographical Divisions of the UNGEGN came together for five days to discuss the benefits to be gained from the national standardization of geographical names. In all, over 100 papers and special presentations were considered by names experts who also took part in a series of workshops on various aspects of the technical treatment of place names. To assist in promoting an awareness of geographical names issues and the work of UNGEGN, a media kit was launched during the 26th Session.

At the opening of the Session, Deputy Director-General of the United Nations Office at Vienna Mazlan Othman welcomed experts to Vienna and stressed the value of correct geographical names “in an increasingly globalized world”, in particular noting “the fast evolution of information technology which offers tremendous opportunities, but also great challenges”. She commended the Group of Experts and indicated that very useful work is being undertaken in a spirit of cooperation between countries.

In addition to working papers on subjects ranging from web-based toponymic training courses to audio files for names pronunciation, there were special technical presentations from organizations such as Google, ESRI, UNICODE and the Internet Corporation for Assigned Names and Numbers (ICANN). Experts learned more about the proposed UN initiative on Global Geospatial information Management (UNGGIM) programme being established through the UN Statistics Division and UN Cartography Section to promote the development of geospatial systems capable of addressing key global challenges. One such challenge – coping with natural disasters – was the subject of special presentations (a) on the recent use of names data in response to floods, fires and earthquakes in Australia and New Zealand, and (b) the development of a UN Gazetteer Framework project designed to enhance access to geographical names data for improved disaster preparedness and response.

Recognizing that place names are valued links with our history, culture and identity, papers touched on the heritage aspects of geographical names. In this context, a presentation was made on the new International Council on Indigenous Place Names (ICIPN) with which a formal liaison has now been established.

Following up on a key theme of the 25th Session of UNGEGN held in Nairobi, delegates continued to explore ways of promoting the relevance of geographical names standardization to governments in Africa through the efforts of the Task Team for Africa. This group has amongst other initiatives, worked with African organizations to provide training in the administration of geographical names. Cooperation will be strengthened with the UN Economic Commission for Africa to create the necessary network and programme to further the progress of geographical names standardization. This includes the development of an Africa-wide geographical names database and gazetteer structure. For this Session of UNGEGN, the Task Team sponsored the second Toponymy Essay and Poem Contest, open to citizens of all African countries. The contest was won by Naima Friha (from Tunisia), Houda Abes Qotb (from Egypt) and Mardochée Ondobo Ndjana (from Cameroon).

In looking forward to the 10th United Nations Conference on the Standardization of Geographical Names to be held in New York in 2012, Helen Kerfoot, UNGEGN Chairperson, said: "Much has been achieved since the 9th Conference, but the challenges of maintaining authoritative names data and distributing it widely must be faced, particularly in view of today's reality where vast quantities of data of unknown provenance now circulate through the social media."

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For more information on the activities of UNGEGN and copies of the working papers presented visit:

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