

**The 26th Session of the United Nations Group of Experts on Geographical Names  
Vienna, 2-6 May 2011**

**Opening Session,  
Monday 2 May 2011, 10.30am**

**Statement by Stefan Schweinfest,  
Assistant Director, UN Statistics Division, DESA**

**Thank you, Madame Chair;  
Ms. Director-General  
Distinguished Delegates and Observers,  
Ladies and Gentlemen,**

It is a great pleasure for me to address this opening session of the 26<sup>th</sup> session of the United Nations Group of Experts on Geographical Names. Permit me to convey to you, at this point, the greetings and best wishes of the Director of the United Nations Statistics Division, Dr. Paul Cheung.

Quite a number of people and institutions have worked very hard to make it possible for us to be here together. Our first big thank you goes to the Bureau of the UN Conference on Standardization of Geographical Names under the tireless leadership of Ms. Helen Kerfoot. You may primarily see your chair in action during our big meetings, but I can assure you that Helen very actively pursues the UNGEGN agenda all year long, I am tempted to say: around the clock: For the past few years now it has almost become a tradition for Helen to visit our office in New York in the first working week of the year, to review progress of ongoing activities and to make plans for the year! She'll literally makes sure UNGEGN is always on UNSD's agenda. I would like to take this opportunity to thank her for her inspiring professional dedication. Furthermore, a special thank you goes, of course, to the colleagues from the United Nations Office in Vienna, represented here by Deputy Director General Ms. Mazlan Othman. Your staff has worked closely with our office in the preparation phase of this meeting and will, no doubt, continue to

support our work as best they can, throughout this coming week. I would also like to thank all the conveners and leaders of the divisions and working groups, the authors of documents and the rapporteurs without whose important contribution a meeting of this size would not be possible. And, last, but not least, I would like to thank all of you who have made the trip to Vienna from different places around the world, to continue here and today the important work of this Group of Experts.

In these initial words of thanks I would also like to especially commend your willingness to move, for the first time and for the sake of greater efficiency, to a 5-day session format. I realize this will put additional burden on those who already work hard behind the scenes, especially the rapporteurs! I trust that all participants through their focused and concise contributions will co-operate with the various session chairs in their difficult task of time management. I would also like to reassure you that the format of the Conference in 2012 (8 days + 2 days UNGEGN) will remain unchanged.

**Ladies and Gentlemen,**

UNGEKN's mandate is to provide continuity for activities between the conferences and to provide leadership in the implementation of resolutions adopted at the United Nations Conferences on the Standardization of Geographical Names. Our office, the UN Statistics Division, as the substantive Secretariat of this body, provides support in various forms, whether it is the planning of the next conference or meeting, the maintenance and updating of the website, including the Geographical Names Database, the production of technical and/or promotional material and the sponsoring of countries for training workshops. I would like to take this opportunity to assure you of our continued commitment to be your partner in the various UNGEGN endeavors.

If anything, the issue of geographical information management and its connections with statistical information has gained increasing attention in our office over the past 2 years since we last met. The many environmental, developmental and humanitarian challenges we are facing today, make it increasingly apparent that location matters and, thus, information on location,

including correct and unambiguous naming of location, is an important tool for policy formulation and monitoring. Our office, together with the Cartographic Section of the United Nations, has, therefore, launched an initiative on GGIM (global geospatial information management). I will have the opportunity tomorrow to present you some more background and detail on this initiative, but I would already like to state here that, in our view, the increased focus in geospatial information will also provide opportunities for higher visibility of your work, and that's why we are looking for your support.

**Ladies and Gentlemen,**

As mentioned above the Conference and the UNGEGN have made important technical contributions to the global process of standardization of geographical names. We are of course operating in a political context, of which we have to be aware, but it is my experience and conviction, that bodies like this one function best when they maintain their technical focus. I am confident that this week will be yet another example how we can make tangible and practical progress, by building on the considerable technical expertise reunited in this room.

I wish you all a very successful and enjoyable UNGEGN session.

Thank you very much for your attention.