AGENDA ITEM 11

Writing systems

(*a*) **Transfer of names from one writing system into another**
   (i) **Into a single romanization system**[1]
   (ii) **Into other writing systems**
(*b*) **Writing of names from unwritten languages**

REPORT OF THE WORKING GROUP ON A SINGLE ROMANIZATION SYTEM, PART 1, 19 FEBRUARY 1970 TO 6 DECEMBER 1971*

In accordance with resolution 9 of the First United Nations Conference on the Standardization of Geographical Names,[2] the *Ad Hoc* Group of Experts on Geographical Names agreed at its second session, held at United Nations Headquarters from 10 to 20 March 1970, to set up a Working Group on a Single Romanization System charged with making a comparative study of the various systems of transliteration and with analysing the advantages and disadvantages of each for the international standardization of geographical names. The *Ad Hoc* Group of Experts recognized that such a comparative study would need to be extremely detailed and would have to be carried out by correspondence, at least in its early stages. Later, the working group would have to meet when and where necessary. The members of the working group are J. Breu, Chairman (Austria), P. J. M. Geelan (United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland), G. Gómez de Silva (Mexico), A. M. Komkov (Union of Soviet Socialist Republics), F. Nédélec (France), C. Page (United States of America) and D. N. Sharma (India).

The working group met twice during the second session of the *Ad Hoc* Group of Experts. At the first meeting, held on 19 February 1970, Mr. Gómez de Silva was unanimously elected chairman of the working group. During the second meeting, held on 20 February 1970, the following decisions were taken:

1. That the working group should begin its work without meetings, by correspondence;
2. That the working group should hold its third meeting during the third session of the *Ad Hoc* Group of Experts on Geographical Names in 1971;
3. That each member of the working group should send to all the other members, if possible, by the end of May 1970, any romanization table (or short article on the subject) he thought might be of general interest, the names of books or long articles dealing with the question of romanization, and any suggested solution to the problem.

The following activities took place between the second and third sessions of the *Ad Hoc* Group of Experts.

The Chairman issued four circulars. He listed 46 official national languages, including the official languages of the constituent republics or states of India and the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics, that are not normally written in the Roman script, and suggested that the work be divided among the members according to the alphabetical sequence of the names of the alphabets (in English) and of the names of the members. This division of work was generally accepted, but some changes were necessary as C. Page and D. N. Sharma expressed preferences for certain languages.

2. Eighteen circulars, including the four circulars of the Chairman, were distributed, containing discussions of the principles of romanization and of terms used in the work of the working group, as well as material concerning the writing systems of the following alphabets: Amharic, Arabic, Armenian, Assamese, Azerbaijani, Bengali, Greek, Gujarati, Hebrew, Hindi, Japanese, Kannada, Kashmiri, Khmer, Korean, Malayalam, Marathi, Nepali, Oriya, Punjabi, Persian, Russian, Sinhalese, Tamil, Telugu, Thai and Urdu.

The third meeting of the working group took place on 3 February 1971 during the third session of the *Ad Hoc* Group of Experts on Geographical Names and was attended by J. Breu, P. J. M. Geelan, P. Hovda, A. M. Komkov, F. Nédélec, C. Page and D. N. Sharma. Present as observers were Y. M. Nawabi (Iran) and C. H. Wang (China). In the absence of the Chairman,

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[1] The Working Group on a Single Romanization System for each Non-Roman Writing System has presented under this subitem papers on the transliteration of the Japanese, Korean, Laotian, Macedonian, Maldivian, modern Greek, Mongol, Persian, Serbo-Croatian, Somali and Thai alphabets. The original text of these papers appeared in the addenda to document E/CONF.61/L.5. The study of these alphabets has been referred back to the Group of Experts for further study and presentation at the third United Nations Conference on the Standardization of Geographical Names, and they are therefore not reproduced here below.

* The original text of this report was contained in document E/CONF.61/L.5.

[2] *United Nations Conference on the Standardization of Geographical Names*, vol. 1, *Report of the Conference* (United Nations publication, Sales No. E.68.I.9), pp. 12-13.

Mr. Breu was appointed acting chairman of the working group by the Group of Experts.

Three written statements were distributed to the members of the working group, one of them containing a full comparative study on the transliteration of Khmer writing submitted by Mr. Page.

The working group realized that the title of resolution 9 of the First United Nations Conference on the Standardization of Geographical Names[3] was subject to misinterpretation. It was suggested, therefore, that the title of resolution 9 should be amended to read: "A single romanization system for each non-Roman writing system for international application". This amendment is submitted as a proposal to the present Conference.

The need for defining certain terms to be used within the working group was recognized, and the following definitions were suggested by Mr. Page and agreed upon by the working group.

Script: a set of graphic symbols which may be variously employed in the representation of the phonological and/or morphological elements of a language in languages (the items of an alphabetic script typically represent phonemes; those of a syllabic script, syllables; and those of an ideographic script, morphemes).

Alphabet: a specific set of graphic symbols which may be employed in the representation of the phonological elements of a particular language.

Transcription: the process of recording the phonological and/or morphological elements of a langage in terms of a specific writing system.

Transliteration: the process of recording the graphic symbols of one writing system in terms of the corresponding graphic symbols of a second writing system.

The following general principles for romanization systems were agreed upon:

1. Systematic reversibility should be sought in so far as is practical;

2. Consistent employment of graphic symbols within any given romanization system should be sought.

Whereas the main activity of the working group between the second and third sessions of the *Ad Hoc* Group of Experts had been related to the collection of material, in the period between the third and fourth sessions of the *Ad Hoc* Group of Experts the members of the working group decided to concentrate on elaborating comparative study.

The division of work was revised and determined as follows.

Greek: Mr. Gómez de Silva.

Amharic: Mr. Breu. In connexion with paragraph 52 of the report of the *Ad Hoc* Group of Experts on its second session (ESA/RT/C/GN/1), Mr. Breu was requested to study the implications of the Ethiopian reply to an inquiry made by the Cartography Section of the United Nations Secretariat.

Hebrew: Mr. Gómez de Silva.

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[3] *Ibid.*

Arabic: Mr. Breu. The meeting further recommended that the expert for the Arabic division contact authorities in the various Arabic-speaking countries with a view to implementing resolution 12 of the First United Nations Conference on the Standardization of Geographical Names.

Persian: Mr. Gómez de Silva. The meeting ascertained from the expert from Iran that proposed alterations to the recommended system for the transliteration of Persian names cited in *Transliteration of Farsi Geographic Names to Latin Alphabet* (Government of Iran, 1967) had not been made up to that time. If modifications were made, the expert from Iran would inform Mr. Gómez de Silva.

Pashtu: Mr. Geelan. Particular consideration will be given to document E/CONF.57/L.61, dated 22 October 1970, of the Sixth United Nations Regional Cartographic Conference for Asia and the Far East.

Somali: Mr. Gómez de Silva.

Serbian: Mr. Gómez de Silva was asked to prepare a draft resolution for the Second United Nations Conference on the Standardization of Geographical Names. Special consideration was to be given to the fact that Serbo-Croatian uses both a Cyrillic and a Roman writing system.

Macedonian: Mr. Nédélec.

Bulgarian: Mr. Geelan.

Mongol: Mr. Nédélec.

Maldivian: Mr. Geelan.

Burmese: Mr. Geelan.

Thai: Mr. Page. The meeting further suggested that Mr. Page should enumerate alterations to the recommended system for the transliteration of Thai names as cited in "Romanization guide for Thai script" (United States Board on Geographic Names, Washington, D.C., 1968).

Khmer: Mr. Page's comparative study revealed some inconsistencies in the joint Cambodian and Board on Geographic Names/Permanent Committee on Geographical Names system drawn up in 1962 and referred to in paragraph 51 of the report of the *Ad Hoc* Group of Experts on its second session (ESA/RT/C/GN/1). These will be brought to the attention of the authorities of the Khmer Republic in the hope that a definitive system may be presented to the Second United Nations Conference on the Standardization of Geographical Names for adoption.

Laotian: Mr. Page.

Chinese: With regard to the last sentence of paragraph 50 of the report of the *Ad Hoc* Group of Experts on its second session, the East Central and South-East European division will submit to the *Ad Hoc* Group of Experts at its fourth meeting a report on the romanization of Chinese script. The United Kingdom division will also prepare a statement, as will Mr. Wang of the East Asian division.

Korean: Mr. Page.

Japanese: Mr. Page.

Languages of the Indian division: It was recommended that the transliteration tables distributed by Mr. Sharma

should be circulated for consideration, and comments directed to him in time for discussion at the Second United Nations Conference on the Standardization of Geographical Names in relation to paragraph (b) of recommendation D in resolution 4 of the First United Nations Conference on the Standardization of Geographical Names.[4] The writing systems of the following languages are involved: Hindi, Nepali, Gujarati, Marathi, Punjabi, Oriya, Bengali, Assamese, Urdu, Telugu, Kannada, Malayalam, Tamil, Kashmiri, Sinhalese and Bhutanese.

Languages of the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics division. Mr. Komkov will present a statement on the romanization of Russian to the Second United Nations Conference on the Standardization of Geographical Names. Subsequently, he will give consideration to romanization systems for the state languages of the constituent Republics other than the Russian Soviet Federated Socialist Republic (Ukrainian, Byelorussian, Moldavian, Tajiki, Uzbek, Turkmen, Kirghiz, Kazakh,

Azerbaijani, Armenian and Georgian). In that connexion, it was proposed that the following modifications should be made to recommendation D of resolution 4 of the First Conference: paragraph (c) should be redesignated (d); and a new paragraph (c) should be inserted to read, "Give a recommendation as to which linguistic form or forms should be used for international standardization".

At its fourth meeting on 12 February 1971 the working group, on the basis of information received from Mr. Gómez de Silva, unanimously elected Mr. Breu to be the new chairman.

Since the third session of the *Ad Hoc* Group of Experts, eight circulars have been distributed amongst the membership of the working group. These circulars included a proposal made by the Chairman on the representation of the comparative studies; material on the writing systems of the Bulgarian, Arabic, Hebrew, Amharic, Chinese and Japanese alphabets, and on the alphabets of non-Slavic languages of the USSR; and comparative studies on the romanization of the Bulgarian, Macedonian, Mongolian, Arabic, Amharic and Maldivian alphabets.

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[4] *Ibid.*, p. 11.

REPORT OF THE WORKING GROUP ON A SINGLE ROMANIZATION SYSTEM, PART 2, 7 DECEMBER 1971 TO 15 APRIL 1972*

Since the composition of part 1 of this report (reproduced immediately above), 13 circulars have been distributed among the membership of the working group. These circulars include draft systems for the romanization of the Devanāgarī alphabet and of Khmer writing, a comparative study of the romanization of the Russian alphabet, comparative tables showing the romanization of the Thai, Laotian, Japanese and Devanāgarī writing systems, and comments on the romanization of the Arabic, Pashtu, and Burmese alphabets.

The Chairman of the group corresponded with the expert of the Arabic division on the subject of a uniform romanization of the Arabic alphabet.

It is planned that the working group will hold its fifth meeting in London on 9 May 1972, i.e. the day immediately before the opening of the Second United Nations Conference on the Standardization of Geographical Names.

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* The original text of this report was contained in document E/CONF.61/L.5/Add.1.