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SIXTH UN CONFERENCE ON GEOGRAPHICAL NAMES DISCUSSES COMPUTERIZATION OF CARTOGRAPHIC INFORMATION

The importance of developing databases to store and share cartographic information was stressed this morning by participants at the Sixth United Nations Conference on the Standardization of Geographical Names.

The advantages of computerized map-making, including the facilitation of translations and the exchange of information, were described by speakers presenting reports on domestic programmes using various types of databases. Representatives stressed the advantages of deriving precise data on location and names from large scale maps and local sources. The use of local pronunciations of names and spellings was also discussed. The representative of Venezuela described a "cartographic dictionary" being developed in her country.

A representative of the United States suggested the establishment of a national names authority to adjudicate problems and serve as the single official source for names. Such a body could also establish the official design of an automated toponymic database, he added.

Reports were presented by the representatives of the United States, Canada, Austria, Venezuela and Japan.

Also this morning, the Conference elected Sylvie Lejune (France) as Vice-Chairman and Roger L. Payne (United States) as Rapporteur. The Chairman of the Conference is Abdelhadi Tazi (Morocco).

The Conference will reconvene at 3 p.m. today to continue discussing terminology in the standardization of geographical names.

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Responding to other queries, he said digitized coordinates helped to achieve the highest possible precision. Some locative factor must be provided, whether it be a high precision or a low-precision one. It was sometimes difficult to determine on a map where one feature ended and another took over. Also different names might be applied wholly or in part to the same feature. Close cooperation with the different state authorities of the United States facilitated identification of local use and acceptance of a name. When information was collected from more than one source, greater accuracy could be achieved. The larger the feature, the more complex the problem, requiring more research.

Regarding population shifts causing the growth of cities and the absorption of smaller towns, he said that problem could be handled in several ways. Usually, the Census Bureau would be involved when towns were absorbed by cities. The United States Census Bureau was engaged in identifying and defining metropolitan jurisdiction and limits as cities grew and changed. "We will never erase any reference to a pre-existing historical place", he said. A record of its existence would be preserved. Digital systems were useful in that connection. Generally two names were not employed for a single feature, but they could be.

HELEN KERFOOT, Executive Secretary of the Canadian Permanent Committee on Geographical Names, presenting her country's paper on toponymic data, said that since 1897, Canada's national names authority had been maintaining records of official geographical names for places and features within the country. Initially they were kept on filing cards and stored alphabetically by province or territory. Over many decades, corrections and additions were made to the records, by hand. The type of information, and how it was recorded, varied.

By the 1960s, many provinces and territories had their own card systems, in addition to the drawers of names records maintained by the secretariat of the Canadian Permanent Committee on Geographical Names. Computerization of names began in the late 1970s. The Committee had begun to document "core" fields of data for geographical names records. She said the names provided for the records covered geographical name; province and/or territory; status of approved name; cross-reference; date latitude and longitude and brief narrative of location. Other "desirable information" included unofficial variant names.

DESOYE HELMUT, Chairman of the Board of Geographical Names of the Austrian Cartographic Commission, said the Austrian Institute of East and South-East European Studies, in collaboration with the Austrian National Library, was preparing a data file on toponyms of central, eastern and south-eastern Europe. It would contain names of settlements, physio-geographical features and administrative units. In addition, there would be information on number of inhabitants in the settlements around the years 1910 and 1990; the current administrative status of those settlements and before the First World War; and their altitude above sea-level.

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RICHARD RANDALL, Executive Secretary of the United States Board of Geographic Names, opening the discussion on geographic names processing systems, said an automated system offered the opportunity to simplify the manual procedures used in names applications across a wide range of products, from map and chart production to gazetteers, and to the daily repetitious tasks associated with the maintenance of the Foreign Place Names File. With the automated facility, the staff of the Foreign Names Committee of the Board of Geographic Names would be able not only to increase the quantity of the names on file but also, more significantly, to improve the quality of the names standardization process and of the products of the Defence Mapping Agency and the Board of Geographic Names.

The Board of Geographic Names would have, by 1993, a data-processing system to allow it to standardize foreign geographical place names for map and chart applications and to meet other requirements. He said that one of the main obstacles in developing an automated system was the need to preserve the diacritics, such as cedillas or accents, and special letters presented in many geographic names. To solve the problem, the geographic names processing system would utilize 8-bit byte storage, divided into six regional language groups with corresponding code sets and soft copy keyboards. Those regional language groups would be given access through font assignments, to the workstation keyboard with a graphic keyboard guide appearing on the workstation monitor.

Several representatives discussed the use of diacritical marks such as cedillas or accents used to indicate different sounds of a letter, when romanizing non-Romance languages. Asked whether those marks would appear on printouts, he said they would. The representative of Saudi Arabia said that Arabic had diacritical marks which were almost never used in maps or in other texts such as books or newspapers. That posed no problems unless a proper name was used, in which case diacritical marks were essential to writing it correctly.

Mr. RANDALL said a system was needed to determine the location of features, whether aerial or linear. Depending on the scale of the map, more than one name might be used. Names were generally collected at the largest scale possible. There was a critical connection between the automation of the collection of names and the map-making process.

Ms. KERFOOT (Canada) introduced a paper on the long-term vision and development plan for a Canadian digital toponymic service. Contractors hired by the Government to make recommendations had to take into account the nature of existing federal, provincial and territorial databases. Cultural differences and trends in information system management and technology development had to be considered as well. The vision for the system was that users might be able to retrieve data from information stored locally. The implementation stage would start with focus on products of national interest, while at the same time respecting the policies, priorities and political and jurisdictional concerns of provinces, she said.

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