

# United Nations

## Press Release

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Sixth UN Conference on the  
Standardization of Geographical Names  
5th Meeting (AM)

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CONFERENCE ON GEOGRAPHICAL NAMES DISCUSSES NATIONAL REPORTS  
ON STANDARDIZATION OF NAMES

Renaming of Places Prompted by Political Change Discussed

Political changes in the republics of the former Soviet Union had resulted in numerous alterations of geographical names, representatives from several of those countries told the Sixth United Nations Conference on Geographical Names this morning. Participants were discussing the progress made in the standardization of geographical names since the last Conference, in 1987.

In Ukraine, for example, State language law required that Ukrainian names be used for all maps and in all areas, even those that did not have majority Ukrainian populations. In Estonia, too, the representative of that country said, the restoration of traditional Estonian names and terms had begun in the wake of years of Soviet rule during which Russian had been the de facto official language.

The representative of the Russian Federation said that some of the national reports presented at the Conference by former Soviet republics contained excessively political phrases which "distorted reality and did not contribute to the work of the Conference".

Reports were presented this morning by the representatives of the Russian Federation, Finland, Hungary, Japan, Estonia, Thailand, Czechoslovakia, Norway, Netherlands, Ukraine, Germany, Canada, Jordan, Venezuela and the United States. A videotape presentation on field collection of geographical names was made by the representative of Finland.

The Conference will meet again at 3 p.m. today to continue its consideration of national progress reports.

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On the use of foreign names, she said the Finnish mass media had been encountering more difficulties, recently, than was formerly the case. The problems had been due to changes in names that had never been used before. Contacts between the Finnish Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the Onomastic Division -- that dealt with names and nomenclature -- and the mass media had been improved to ensure that new foreign names were used correctly.

BELA POKOLY (Hungary) presented his country's progress report on standardizing place names. He said in Hungary, standardization of geographical names had a decades-long history. Hungary's Committee on Geographical Names, which reported to the Ministry of Agriculture, was a decision-making body which determined all official names. The report described the work of the Committee as well as the gazetteers of administrative names, which were published by the Statistical Office of Hungary. Lists of counties, cities, towns and communes, containing demographic data, were also published. "With the change of the political system, the changing of names of thousands of streets, squares and other areas has become an issue", he said.

JUNIICHI KANEKO (Japan) presented the progress report of his country. He said several agencies and organizations were responsible for the standardization of names in Japan. Since the Fifth Conference, 379 names had been adopted for undersea features, bringing the total to 1,059. The romanization of Japanese characters was carried out on the basis of a system called the "Kunrei Siki" system. There was no major development to report on the romanization of Japanese characters, he said.

Mr. RANNUT (Estonia) said his country was taking part in the Conference for the first time. Since the 1920s, the place names of Estonia had officially been monolingual and almost totally in Estonian. They were written in the Roman alphabet. The exceptions were names used in areas that had been settled by minorities. He said that in the years of Soviet rule, Russian was de facto the first, official language. The toponyms of Estonia continued to be recognized in their Estonian form, but for Russian use, they were transcribed into Cyrillic letters, according to officially adopted rules.

Further, he said the National Land Board had started a mapping programme aimed at providing the authorities and public with large-scale topographic maps in Estonian. A database of cartographic names, intended to be a national database, was being formed. It was part of a wider project to cover all the information needed for the compilation of maps. The first stage of administrative reform, begun in 1990, had been devoted to the restoration of terms of traditional administrative units. Consequently, "village soviets", for instance, were gradually becoming "parishes". It was obvious, he said, that the programme would need a national names authority to coordinate the efforts of standardizing place names and to secure the observance of national interests and values in the process.

PRASONG CHINGCHAI (Thailand) introduced the report on the progress made in his county since the Fifth Conference. Much of that progress had already been discussed last week, he said, especially as regarded the list of

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KARL AUGUST SEEL (Germany) said that as a result of the reunification of Germany, a new map of the country was being prepared. It was scheduled for publication in 1993. Administrative and other geographical names in the former Federal Republic of Germany were also being revised. A data file of the Federal German Gazetteer was continually being updated. A new edition of "Toponymic Guidelines" for editors of maps and other publications had been submitted to the current Conference. It replaced the first edition which was published in 1981.

In addition, he said the digital Antarctic Names Database of German place-names in the Antarctic was also being maintained. It included the names assigned within the framework of research done by the German-speaking nations in Antarctica.

HELEN KERFOOT (Canada) presented the report of the United States/Canada Division of the United Nations Group of Experts on Geographical Names. She said that Division had met three times since 1987, in Washington, D.C., to study features common to both countries and to identify names. In 1988, a mechanism had been established to reduce possible confusion in feature identification.

HUSSAM MADANAT (Jordan) said that during the British mandate following the First World War, the British Government produced maps for Jordan and Palestine in English. In the early 1960s, however, the American Army Map Service had produced a new one for the Kingdom of Jordan. The United States had also published an official Standard Names Gazetteer for Jordan. Those maps had all been translated into Arabic. The Arabic versions had suffered from many mistakes due to ignorance and the shortcomings of the transliteration system adopted by the British and the Americans. The Royal Jordanian Geographic Centre, established in 1975, had adopted a special transliteration system to overcome those difficulties.

The Centre was updating maps, and had also produced a school atlas, he continued. Israeli authorities had replaced original Arabic place-names in the occupied West Bank with Jewish names. The centre faced many problems in producing maps in Arabic. It was difficult to fix names for desert places because the Bedouin tribesmen who inhabited the areas were nomads. There was no national authority for geographical names. A national body formed in 1983 was now non-existent and the Centre was filling the vacuum.

The representative of the United Kingdom commented that the Bedouins were a dying race and the remnants of the tribes were moving into the cities.

NAFTALI KADMON (Israel) objected to a passage in the Jordanian report which recommended that the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) should be made aware of the fact that "Israeli authorities in the occupied territories are trying to efface and abolish the existing Arabic names of locations in the occupied territories in Palestine and replace them by Hebrew names".

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