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Press Release

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Sixth UN Conference on the
Standardization of Geographical Names
6th Meeting (PM)

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MECHANISM TO DEAL WITH COMPLAINTS ARISING FROM CHANGES IN PLACE-NAMES
CALLED FOR AT CONFERENCE ON GEOGRAPHICAL NAMES

The representative of Cyprus proposed the establishment of a mechanism to deal with complaints of Member States relating to changes in place-names, as the Sixth United Nations Conference on Geographical Names continued this afternoon. The Conference was discussing national reports on toponymy -- the study of place-names.

The representative of Cyprus said that Turkey, following its 1974 invasion of Cyprus, has altered historical names, an act which was "tantamount to an alteration of history". The Conference should establish a mechanism to formally deal with complaints arising from such situations. The representative of Turkey said the issues raised by the representative of Cyprus were not technical but political in nature, and the Conference should concern itself only with technical matters.

Also this afternoon the Conference decided to establish two new Divisions of the United Nations Group of Experts on Geographical Names: an Africa South Division and a Baltic Division. The Group of Experts had previously consisted of 19 linguistic and geographical divisions.

National reports were presented this afternoon by the representatives of Indonesia, Ireland, Cyprus, China, Sweden, Morocco, Malaysia, Oman, Libya, Yemen, United States and Canada.

A representative of the Organization of Islamic Capitals and Cities also addressed the Conference.

The Conference will meet again at 10 a.m. on Wednesday, 2 September, to hear the introduction of draft proposals on various issues dealing with the standardization of geographical names.

(more)

Cypriot gazetteers, maps and charts contained information derived from the British and Ottoman occupations, he continued. The publication of toponyms, or place-names, in Cyprus had been distorted since the invasion by Turkey, which had displaced numerous persons, thus making it impossible to contact them and preserve the original names of places they had used. The occupying Turkish elements had altered names, which was tantamount to an alteration of the history of the occupied region of Cyprus. Those acts violated several resolutions adopted by previous United Nations Conferences on the Standardization of Geographical Names. He proposed that the Conference establish a mechanism for complaints such as those of his country.

METIN TUNCEL (Turkey) said he did not want to discuss the question of Cyprus at the Geographical Names Conference, which was convened to deal with technical matters. The events of 1962 to 1974 had been purely political, and were not of a technical nature. Turkey would soon be presenting a document at the Conference revealing the distortions contained in the Greek Cypriot report.

WANG JITONG (China) said his country had progressed in the standardization of geographical names since the 1987 Conference in Montreal. Supplementary work on place-names had been completed and a survey of geographical names had been carried out.

The management of place-names in cities and towns had become the focus of activity nationwide, he continued. Many provincial committees on geographical names had compiled different kinds of gazetteers, local records and geographical maps. Volumes on place names in a number of provinces had been published. The Dictionary of China Geographical Names, containing 21,240 entries, had been published. The Standardization of the Information System of Chinese Place-Names included general principles, place-names classification and code and data files. An experimental work to establish a data base of place-names at the county level had been completed.

He also referred to the establishment in 1988 of the China Society of Toponymy. The Society had 500 members and consisted of five special committees that dealt with specific aspects of toponymy. Training programmes were organized regularly in every province and autonomous region.

Responding to questions, he said all aspects of toponymy were covered in the training courses. Two books on the training courses would be published in English next year and would be made available to interested delegates. In answer to another question, he said that China had various sources of place-names. Some names were more complicated than others.

ANN-CRISTIN MATTISSON (Sweden) introduced a report which described how Sweden used a database and gazetteer in its cartographic activities.

ABDELLATIF BELBACHIR (Morocco) introduced the progress report of his country on the standardization of geographic names. He said Morocco constantly endeavoured to respond to United Nations recommendations on the subject of cartography. Morocco placed an emphasis on the standardization of geographic names, especially when drawing up topographic and thematic maps. A

AHMED FAWZI HILALL BEN FAID (Libya) introduced the report on his country. He said Libya's proximity to African countries, speaking various languages, had influenced the naming process. Several colonial eras, including occupations by Italy and the United Kingdom, had given rise to battles which had affected Libyan topography. Maps of the colonial eras were often accurate in terms of features but not in terms of names, which had in some cases been written in Latin. In 1970, Libya had begun to arabize those maps. Certain procedures were being employed with a view to bringing out important geographical features. Names which had been approved by local authorities were being registered. In some regions, two different names were used to describe a single feature. On the issue of changing names of features in the occupied territories, he said the United Nations, through the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), should work to prevent the authorities occupying Palestine from changing place-names there.

NAFTALI KADMON (Israel) said the Conference should refrain from taking up political issues.

ALI ABDULLA HIZAM (Yemen) said since the unification of his country in 1990, Yemen had attempted to standardize all names on its maps. Names in some regions were presented in languages other than Arabic, wherever appropriate. Local names were used particularly for coastal areas and the areas near the Red Sea and Arabian Sea. An updated map of Yemen was currently being produced. Yemen was grateful to all countries that had ceased to use the nomenclature used prior to unification, and called on all others to call his country the "United Republic of Yemen".

RICHARD R. RANDALL (United States) introduced a revised statute of the United Nations Group of Experts to be approved by the Conference. The revised statute covered the aims, principles and functions of the Group. The aims included emphasizing the importance of the standardization of geographical names; collecting the results of work of national and international bodies dealing with such issues and facilitating the dissemination of those results to United Nations Member States.

The Expert Group also aimed at playing an active role in facilitating scientific and technical assistance, in particular to developing countries, and in creating mechanisms for the national and international standardization of geographical names, he said. The Group's functions also included the development of procedures and establishment of mechanisms for standardization in response to specific national requirements and particular requests. It coordinated the activities of linguistic groups or geographic divisions that worked at the national level and promoted uniformity in their work.

The Expert Group needed to make its work better known to the general public, he said.

A number of delegations made comments on the draft revised statute, with the representative of Cyprus appealing for a specific provision to protect and safeguard his country's national heritage. He said he was not making a