

New York, 26 February - 9 March 1979
Agenda item No. 9

UK PROPOSAL FOR ACTION AT THE FORTHCOMING MEETING OF UNGEGN

(Paper submitted by the UK Division)

In all the United Nations Conferences on the Standardization of Geographical Names and the meetings of the United Nations Group of Experts on Geographical Names (UNGEGN) over the past few years, political matters have tended to intrude themselves to the point where progress in the true business of standardization is impeded or, in some cases, prevented altogether. It is essential for the continued existence and operation of the UNGEGN that matters such as political sovereignty which are items for discussion in the General Assembly or even the Security Council are not allowed to occupy the time of either UNGEGN or future conferences on the Standardization of Geographical Names.

A review of the aims and functions of the UNGEGN and the scope of matters for inclusion in future conferences is now necessary and it is proposed that this review be undertaken at the present session of UNGEGN.

The United Kingdom likewise deplors the recent trend of nations whose writing system is not the Roman alphabet, many of whom produce few, if any, maps in the Roman alphabet, to specify how geographical names will be spelled by nations whose language is written solely in the Roman alphabet. It is absurd that a nation whose alphabet is not the Roman alphabet should define how Roman alphabet users should transliterate or transcribe names from non-Roman alphabets. Recently, the practice of voting on such matters has given nations of this kind, who are in no way affected by decisions, equal vote with Roman-alphabet users to whom such matters are of vital concern. This practice will, inevitably, lead to certain Roman-alphabet nations refusing to implement decisions achieved in this way, especially since some of the very non-Roman alphabet nations who are most out-spoken on these issues are in no way affected themselves. Ultimately, implementation rests with individual Roman-alphabet nations and if those who are most active in the cartographic field refuse to comply with the decisions of the UN Conferences, those decisions are to all practical purposes invalidated. Furthermore, the standing of the conferences and UNGEGN itself is greatly reduced if members of ECOSOC are obliged to reject the conclusions of a Conference as not being in their best interest. Unless conference decisions are approved by ECOSOC, the holding of a conference will appear to have been a waste of time.

The trend to vote and particularly to vote in blocs, has been accompanied by a further tendency to devise romanization systems without consultation with Roman alphabet nations, particularly those active in map production, in the knowledge the bloc voting will result in the acceptance of the systems so devised. At the Athens Conference a nation whose representative strongly advocated a certain romanization system and voted for its acceptance by the Conference, announced afterwards that the system could not be used by his own nation because his vers: on

of the Roman alphabet did not lend itself to application of the system. This cynical approach to standardization together with the lack of consultation between nations are deplored and may well lead to rejection of a system at ECOSOC and refusal by individual nations to implement the Conference decisions. The decision on whether to employ any particular system of transliteration or transcription must depend on the will of individual nations.

For a system to be acceptable to map-producing nations it must fulfil certain minimum requirements:

- (i) It must be permanent. A system which is subject to constant change or one which is under review with the object of amendment or replacement cannot form a satisfactory basis for standardization.
- (ii) The system must be capable of use on maps, and where Roman-alphabet maps are produced in the country whose language is being romanized the system must be that used on such maps.
- (iii) Adequate sources to which the system can be applied must be available. In this regard, the availability of cartographic and documentary material is an important factor.