

New York, 26 February - 9 March 1979
Agenda item No. 10(f)

REPORT BY THE CHAIRMAN OF THE WORKING GROUP ON GAZETTEERS

Following the Athens Conference where the desirability of producing a Concise Gazetteer of the World was reiterated, the methods by which such a gazetteer might be prepared and the problems associated with its preparation have been under study. Whilst this project was described by the Chairman of the Group of Experts as one of the most important tasks the UNGEGN could undertake, there are many practical difficulties to be overcome before such a publication could be issued.

It will be recalled that the consensus within UNGEGN and at the Conference was for a gazetteer in one or two volumes comprising, perhaps, 200,000 names. Anything less would be of very limited use bearing in mind the reference needs of United Nations delegates and staff and the availability of other sources of reference. One of the advantages of a concise gazetteer must be its potential for finding the locations of places which are less likely to be known by those using it as a work of reference.

Another function of the concise gazetteer would be to promulgate the standardizing of names resulting from the UN Conferences on the standardization of Geographical Names. Yet there are many areas of the world where no such standardization has yet been accomplished. Certain nations, furthermore, had expressed reservations at ECOSOC concerning certain of the results of the Conferences.

It would be easy to embark upon the task of producing the Concise Gazetteer but the result would have to be acceptable to individual member countries of the UN as well as to the experts of UNGEGN. The task of producing a document acceptable to both bodies needs much careful thought and no little time. The UNGEGN must acquaint itself with the problems associated with production and the possible areas of conflict not only during its preparation but after its issue, before setting the work in motion.

Only in the past month have Pin Yin names received more or less universal acceptance as the replacement for most of the Wade-Giles names so widely in use earlier. Whilst all the problems concerning names in China have not been resolved the position in relation to the production of a gazetteer has changed drastically since the beginning of 1979. Now it is possible to give Pin-Yin names without the Wade-Giles alternatives but the question remains as to how many Wade-Giles spellings and other established spellings will need to be included in the gazetteer so that it may serve adequately as a work of reference. To abolish all such names would impair the usefulness of the gazetteer. Their preservation for an interim period of undefined duration would on the other hand, be most beneficial.

For areas of the world where agreement has not been reached, the best course would appear to be to give alternative names using as a basis for compilation an acceptable existing published source and adding the spelling desired by the nation within whose territory the name occurs. It is suggested that the Times Atlas which has an index of the appropriate size would be suitable as the basis for the Concise Gazetteer.

Working from an atlas has many great advantages. The place-names can be up-dated from the maps within the atlas as opposed to trying to work from a list alone. Secondly, name coverage reflects map coverage and map coverage, in general, reflects the relative importance of the area from the point of view of reference. There is, above all, the advantage of being able to start from an existing names index which could be readily converted to a gazetteer to provide a provisional edition should one be required.

It is to be hoped that at this meeting of UNEGGN it will be possible to obtain agreement that coordinates of latitude and longitude will be given in the Concise Gazetteer to one minute of arc which is the usual order of accuracy of position given in atlases and other works of reference. So far agreement on this point has not proved possible at UNEGGN meetings or in the conferences. Some years ago a publication of the USSR gave coordinates of places to one-tenth of a degree and it is hoped that such a list of names could be up-dated and the additional accuracy be given so as to provide uniform and useful references in the gazetteer. It is also hoped that other nations will act likewise.

Many areas present special and acute problems with regard to the system to be used for writing names e.g. Korea where three separate systems are in use (two for the South, one for the North) but the most acute difficulties are in areas of political disagreement and the difficulties are sometimes compounded by linguistic considerations as well. In some parts of the world, one country will only accept names spelled in a certain way, another country will not accept names spelled in that way. The inclusion of both forms is sometimes not acceptable to one or both parties. Not only do such conflicts occur on land but over the sea areas where rival claims to territorial limits exist.

The UNEGGN is asked to consider all the above points most carefully and not to discuss them as minor matters having little bearing on the preparation of the gazetteer. From time-to-time within the Group of Experts one sees examples of the kind of errors and the nature of problems which occur when a country tries to compile a list of entities. It would be very easy for the UNEGGN to offend many countries and to impair its reputation as a body of experts by the presentation of an inexperienced work. From a Group of Experts the United Nations is entitled to expect a product of a very high standard and this cannot be achieved without care and much thought on the form the Gazetteer will take and how the matters mentioned above as well as many others such as which exonyms are to be included, are handled. This is the kind of publication which could prove a great embarrassment if action is too precipitate.