

**Welcome Address by the
Federal Minister of the Interior
Otto Schily**

**Opening of
the Eighth UN Conference on the Standardization of Geographical Names
in Berlin
on 27 August 2002**

Vice-Secretary General
Ladies and gentlemen

Let me welcome you to Berlin to the Eighth United Nations Conference on the Standardization of Geographical Names, one of the major technical conferences on geo-information. With its invitation the Federal Government underlines the importance of the international standardization of geographical names and wishes to give additional impetus to the valuable work of the United Nations in this field. For many of you the visit to this city will give you the first chance to get to know Berlin in its role as the German capital after Germany's reunification.

In Germany and in other parts of Europe we have been experiencing the importance of geoinformation and all related data in a dramatical way. The flood disaster with its horrible devastation in several federal states, in neighbouring countries as well as in some CIS states and now also in China, has required a well-working disaster management which has to rely on geographical names that are registered and used systematically. My trips to Passau, Dresden and Pirna have shown me clearly how important up-dated and standardized names of places and reference systems are in order to be able to take security and assistance measures in a targeted manner.

The process of defining geographical names is hence more complex and less abstract than some might think at first sight. In this process it is also important that these data are available beyond regional and national borders. For this reason we are working on efficiency increases by making these data available in digital data bases. Germany also supports the efforts of the United Nations in this respect by numerous initiatives – as aimed at by the relevant UN resolutions.

Ladies and gentlemen, in the forthcoming days you will seek to improve worldwide orientation and communication through the standardization of geographical names and hence contribute to improved international co-operation, for instance in the field

of disaster management. From the Federal Government's point of view it is in particular the objective of the United Nations which should be supported: the intention is to facilitate international assistance measures by standardized geographical names.

But it is not only disaster control for which standardized geographical nomenclatures and gazetteers are important: A newspaper article of 6 August read that a young British couple had planned their holidays in Australia. However, after a long flight the young couple was very surprised to find forests instead of enjoying the prospect of Australian metropolitan flair. They had simply boarded a flight to the Sydney in Canada, Nova Scotia. These mishaps, too, could perhaps be avoided in the future.

Tourism is only one example of international agreements on binding rules and guidelines on the spelling of geographical names. Such standards serve the UN administration itself as well as promote the successful development of national economies. Sustainable economic development without reliable cartographic material, including complete and standardized lists of geographical names, is not conceivable for less developed countries. Above all, standardization is important in the fields of public security, trade, transport, administration and education.

But it is not only the developing countries which need better cartographic material for successful economic development. Reliable, updated and comprehensive geoinformation is an important economic factor worldwide. Today we know that some 80 percent of all decisions in public and private life are spatially related and that the majority of all decisions are taken on the basis of specific geo-information, irrespective of the development status of a country, for instance in regional planning, the construction industry or environmental protection, disaster management and national defence, traffic routing and the aerospace industry.

Data on geoinformation, including names, should however always be up-to-date and widely available. On its path towards the information society, Germany is making very good progress, the standardization of geographical names also benefits from it. The government programmes "Innovation and Jobs in the Information Society of the 21st century" and, from a domestic policy perspective – the especially important BundOnline 2005 e-government programme are milestones of creative policy and key elements of ongoing state modernization. By 2005, the federal level will provide all suitable administrative services online. One project of this programme is the establishment of an interdisciplinary internet portal for geoinformation. Geographical names will perform an important linking function in it. Also, the standardization of the

spelling of geographical names continues to offer a great advantage for the promotion and further development of electronic, Internet-based and transnational business processes.

In order to enable the international expert community to start from common ground, we have hosted, together with the United Nations, a training seminar on geographical names immediately before the conference. Experts and junior staff from less developed countries have taken the opportunity to get to know the fundamentals for setting up data bases on geographical names. We wish to thank the Federal Agency for Cartography and Geodesy and the Foreign Office for organizing this initiative.

I hope that Germany as the host can again contribute to a successful conference. Berlin is an adequate venue for this conference. The eventful history of this city is laden with important names. Those who stroll along the streets and avenues, who pass through the places of this city, can actually follow the history of several centuries and the biographies of many renowned personalities with the help of signposts; they can attribute names and places to historic events, from the Great Elector to Nobel Prize winners, politicians, poets and philosophers up to actresses.

At the same time, Berlin has also had some mixed experience of geographical names. The fact that the divided city was governed by two different political systems, could and still can be seen by the names given to public spaces. During the division period this meant that even the bare existence of certain parts of the city was simply denied. In the former East Berlin just one type of city map was available which ignored the Western part of the city. Beyond the frontier the paper was left blank – as a blind spot of history. Foreign visitors who, as opposed to East Berliners, were allowed to enter the Western part needed a second map in order to puzzle together the city and to find Charlottenburg Palace or Savigny Platz.

After German re-unification, many streets, bridges and places were given back their original names or were re-named. Above all, political tact and sensitivity were needed in this process. For public memory is not inconsiderably affected when persons who have been remembered and commemorated for decades, are suddenly wiped out and hence escape public memory. Naming may create or change identity, can establish links between people, history and geography.

An international congress like this one also draws our attention to another sense: the sense of hearing. The standardization of the pronunciation of geographical data is also important. The Conference has put it on its agenda. The participants will hence

be given the chance to get to know the German project of setting up a data base on pronunciation. In it, the pronunciation of German and foreign language terms is laid down for the radio and television broadcasting programmes of the first German television channel.

If you have any difficulties in finding your way to Brandenburg Gate, I wish you pleasant practical checks of the quality of German maps of Berlin. I hope that you will find your way in a city where places change constantly. Even though sometimes the very attraction lies in taking a detour or in making spontaneous discoveries, you should be able to tell exactly where you have been by knowing the exact names of places. In this spirit, I wish you every success for your work.

Translation

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Opening
of the Technical Exhibition on the Occasion of the
8th UN Conference on Standardisation of Geographical Names
by State Secretary Brigitte Zypries
at the Conference Centre of the Federal Foreign Office in Berlin
on 27 August 2002

Ladies and Gentlemen,
Colleagues and experts.

This morning Under Secretary General **Ordzhonikidze** and Minister **Schily** inaugurated the conference and paid tribute to its importance. The agenda that you will have to cope with during these days is awesome - despite the 8 working days available to you. During this time you will have to debate about 175 working documents that have been submitted. The outcome of this conference will be resolutions with which you intend to move closer to the difficult objective of standardising geographical names in speech and writing the world over.

Communication about space, i. e. exchange of geo-information, takes place in most cases with reference to geographical names or the description of places. In order to be able to communicate about our environment it is therefore indispensable that both partners in the communication process possess the same set of rules and codes to render the spoken or written name in a form that will be understood by both sides.

The creation of uniform standards - internationally, but also nationally - is imperative in particular in this field. And it makes sense to achieve this through international co-operation. The UN forum dealing with this matter is the Group of Experts on Geographical Names (UNGEGN), which also convenes this conference on the standardisation of geographical names.

In order to provide you with an stimulating change from your busy conference sessions the German Government, as host of this conference, has taken care of providing you with a varied expert and social programme. Part of this is the technical exhibition that we are inaugurating this evening.

In my capacity as State Secretary in the Federal Ministry of the Interior and, at the same time, chair of an interministerial committee charged with the co-ordination of geo-information systems in the federal administration in Germany I am also responsible for the topic of your conference. That is why it is my pleasure to be here together with you to launch this exhibition.

I have been quite surprised at the wide range of topics that can be found on the agenda of your conference – and I say this as someone who is not an expert. Some of these issues are presented with optical and acoustic means in the technical exhibition.

The part of the exhibition called “Country Exhibition” provides participating countries with the opportunity to present the most recent results from their national standardisation efforts in the Europasaal. From tomorrow onwards there will also be brief presentations during the conference breaks.

Many interesting maps and other documents are on display in the Country Exhibition, and I am sure that you will find up-to-date publications, which will inform you about the latest developments.

Maybe I should add some remarks on this part of the exhibition: As a matter-of-course the organiser of this conference was not in a position to give expert advice on all the details included in the maps.

Therefore, I should like to point out that details noted on the maps do not always reflect the position of the United Nations or the host country. I ask for your understanding for this.

During the next two days there will be presentations of solutions and approaches for the processing of geographical data in a digital setting in the lounge in front of the conference halls of the Foreign Office. We have managed to gain though not many, but innovative and leading companies and institutions to present their proposals for solutions concerning the different issues at stake.

The heart of the exhibition, though, is the "Topical Exhibition" placed by the organisers under the leitmotif of:

"Preserving the past - linking to the future".

This is a vivid presentation of six topics that sketch out important aspects of the overall issue in a graphically well-presented way.

When a moment ago, I had the opportunity to gain an overview of the exhibition, one topic particularly amused me: It is headed "Curiosities" and shows a humorous and - voluntar-

ily or involuntarily - funny side of an otherwise serious matter. A map of New Zealand, for instance, depicts a mountain top with a name that is impossible to pronounce – it consists of nearly 25 syllables.

We know from history that Hannibal crossed the Alps with elephants, but there is no mention of any camels. However, in the Central Alps, there is a mountain peak with an altitude of more than 3000 m which takes its name from this desert animal. I found this name on a part of a map of Switzerland.

You can also find such curious names in the surrounding region of Berlin. It may not be that difficult to find out how a small village close to Rathenow in the Federal State of Brandenburg got its name “Wassersuppe”, which means “watery soup” in English, as long as you are not served such soup at this conference. You probably know similar examples from your home countries.

A competition has been announced with the most original entry being awarded a price.

I should like to wish the organisers that the exhibition will attract a lot of visitors and that it will offer the participants a forum for further discussions during the conference.

And I should like to thank the people of the Federal Agency for Cartography and Geodesy who, with the support of many of the experts present here, have succeeded in organising an exhibition that meets high technical and graphic standards.

I should like to wish all of you a successful conference and an enjoyable stay in Berlin.