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The Standardization of Geographical Names
Within the Framework of the United Nations -
Information Paper for the International
Cartographic Association

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Item 4 of the Provisional Agenda

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Information Paper for the International Cartographic Association

Prepared by Josef Breu, Austria
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- 1 The following lines are intended to meet the practical requirements of the general cartographer. Lengthy theoretical discussions on this rather marginal subject will be of little use to him. What he wants to know is first of all what resolutions the United Nations have adopted in the field of geographical names and what sources are available for his practical work. The paper deals, of course, only with the most important subjects. A complete coverage of the matter is not intended. For further information see the source material as given under 6.

- 2 Aims of the endeavours of the United Nations
 - 2.1 National Standardization of geographical names. That means that every named topographical entity within a country has a name approved by official names authorities. These standardized names should comply with the local usage and be written as far as possible in a linguistically correct form. National standardization is one of the prerequisites of international standardization.
 - 2.2 International standardization of geographical names is that activity aiming at a maximum possible uniformity in the form of every geographical name on the earth and of topographical names on other bodies of the solar system by means of national standardization and/or international agreement, including the achievement of equivalences between different writing systems.

- 3 Means for achieving a general standardization of geographical names
 - 3.1 Group of Experts on Geographical Names
The first meeting of a United Nations Group of Experts on Geographical Names took place from 20 June to 1 July 1960 in New York. The group was charged by the United Nations to consider the technical and linguistical problems of the national standardization of geographical names and to report to the ECOSOC whether it would be advisable to prepare an international conference on this subject.

The recommendations made at this meeting and during a second one in 1966 resulted in organizing a first United Nations conference at Geneva in 1967 which adopted a resolution recommending to the ECOSOC to create a United Nations permanent committee on geographical names. At the end of this conference some participants convened creating an Ad Hoc Group of Experts on Geographical Names.

Before its fourth session this group obtained the status of a permanent United Nations Group of Experts on Geographical Names (UNGEGN). The ECOSOC has charged this group with providing for continuous co-ordination and liaison among countries to further the standardization of geographical names and to encourage the formation of linguistic/geographical divisions.

These divisions were formed in order to achieve the results required, on both the national and the international levels, as specified in the resolutions adopted at the United Nations conferences.

Linguistic/geographical divisions:

Africa Central Division
Africa East Division
Africa West Division
Arabic Division
Asia East Division (other than China)
Asia South-East Division
Asia South-West Division (other than Arabic)
China Division
Dutch and German-speaking Division
East Central and South-East Europe Division
India Division
Latin America Division
Norden Division
Romano-Hellenic Division
Union of Soviet Socialist Republics Division
United Kingdom Division
United States of America/Canada Division

The divisions are represented in the Group of Experts by division chairmen elected by the divisions themselves.

In order to accomplish special tasks efficiently the following working groups have been created:

Working Group on Definitions
Working Group on Undersea and Maritime Features
Working Group on Extraterrestrial Topographical Features
Working Group on a Single Romanization System for Each
Non-Roman Writing System
Working Group on Training Courses
Working Group on Gazetteers
Working Group on Automated Data Processing
Working Group on the List of Country Names

The Cartography Section of the United Nations provides the secretariat for the group and may be contacted from interested persons and institutions regarding questions of geographical names. The Cartography Section can forward such queries to the chairman of the group, to the respective division chairman, national expert or convenor of a working group.

3.2 The United Nations Conferences on the Standardization of Geographical Names

The conferences are held in pursuance of decisions taken by the ECOSOC the preparatory work being done by the U.N. Group of Experts.

The conferences adopt resolutions having the character of recommendations of the United Nations Organisation to its member nations.

Till now there were held 3 conferences, i.e. at Geneva in 1967, in London in 1972, and in Athens in 1977.

4 The most important practical results as achieved till now.

4.1 Glossary of Technical Terminology Employed in the Standardization of Geographical Names, published in English, French, and Spanish, in vol.II(pp. 48 - 58) of the Report of the Second United Nations Conference. A revised edition will be published in World Cartography.

4.2 Resolution 4 on the National Standardization of the Geneva Conference of 1967. This resolution covers in an exhaustive way the whole subject: national names authorities, field collection of names, office treatment of names, treatment of names in multilingual areas, national gazetteers.

The national reports submitted to the later conferences show the great response this fundamental resolution has had.

4.3 Rules for international cartography

4.3.1 Resolution 29 of the London Conference of 1972 on exonyms recommends that, within the international standardization of geographical names, the use of those exonyms (conventional names, traditional names) designating geographical entities falling wholly within one state should be reduced as far and as quickly as possible.

4.3.2 Resolution 10 of the Geneva Conference of 1967 recommends that in international use all geographical names officially written in a Roman alphabet by the countries concerned should remain unmodified and keep their distinguishing marks, even, and indeed particularly, when they are written in capital letters.

4.3.3 All three U.N. conferences have adopted resolutions containing recommendations on the international acceptance of romanization systems for certain non-Roman alphabets and scripts. Geneva 1967: Arabic, Persian, Thai, Chinese, Amharic; London 1972: Bulgarian, Serbian, Macedonian, Amharic, Arabic, Hebrew, Khmer, Hindi, Nepali, Marathi, Gujarati, Panjabi, Bangala, Asamiya, Oriya, Telugu, Kannada, Malayalam, Tamil, Urdu, Kashmiri; Athens 1977: Chinese, Arabic, Bulgarian, Serbian, Macedonian, Hindi, Nepali, Marathi, Gujarati, Panjabi, Bangala, Asamiya, Oriya, Telugu, Kannada, Malayalam, Tamil, Urdu, Kashmiri, Hebrew.

5 Results envisaged for the future

5.1 Gazetteers

A great project for the future is a United Nations Gazetteer of the World in a uniform format consisting of individual volumes each of them covering a single country. Till now there exist only gazetteers which can be classified as provisional U.N. Gazetteers in so far as they although complying with the factual requirements of the U.N. Gazetteers as specified by the U.N. conferences do not fulfill the necessary requirements of formal representation. A working group is preparing a one volume Concise Gazetteer of the World comprising not many more than 15,000 to 20,000 names.

5.2 The Group of Experts has started work on Toponymic Guidelines for Cartography. It is hoped that the next conference will adopt a resolution to this point. The idea is that each country produces such a document in which all essential facts concerning the treatment of geographical names are stated: language situation, scripts and alphabets, general spelling rules, romanization, glossary of generic terms, list of names authorities etc.

5.3 The results of the Working Groups on Undersea and Maritime Features and on Extraterrestrial Topographical Features will publish the results of their work as soon as possible. At present an intensive co-operation is under way with the other international bodies dealing with these subjects.

5.4 Although there have been made United Nations recommendations on romanization systems for a number of scripts and alphabets still much has been left to be done. Thus the cartographer at present has no reliable guidance for example of Russian or Japanese. The United Nations have been asked by the London Conference of 1972 to publish a booklet containing the recommended romanization systems.

- 5.5 It is planned that the Cartography Section issues an Information Bulletin as a non-official quarterly publication of 4-6 pp.
- 5.6 The Working Group on Training Courses is still endeavouring to put into practice the project of Training Courses in Toponymy which should play an essential role in the field of technical assistance and international co-operation.

6 Reference material for the cartographer

6.1 Reports of the conferences

- 6.1.1 United Nations Conference on the Standardization of Geographical Names, Geneva, 4 - 22 September 1967, ed. by the ECOSOC of the U.N.
- Vol. 1, Report of the Conference, document E/CONF.53/3, New York, 1968, 28 pp.
Contents: Summary of the work, resolutions adopted, list of documents issued for the conference etc.
- Vol. 2, Proceedings of the Conference and technical papers, document E/CONF. 53/4, New York, 1969, 157 pp.
Contents: Summary records of the 9 plenary meetings, 26 national reports on the progress made in the standardization of geographical names, 45 technical papers on exchange of experience, geographical terms, writing systems, and international co-operation.
- 6.1.2 Second United Nations Conference on the Standardization of Geographical Names, London, 10 - 31 May 1972, ed. by the ECOSOC of the U.N.
- Vol. 1, Report of the Conference, document E/CONF.61/4, New York, 1974, 26 pp.
Contents: Summary of the work, resolutions adopted, list of documents issued for the conference etc.
- Vol. 2, Technical papers, document E/CONF. 61/4/Add.1, New York 1974, 254 pp.
Contents: 34 reports by divisions and governments on the situation in their regions and countries, 83 technical papers on terminology, national standardization, geographical terms, writing systems, conventional names, names of features beyond a single sovereignty, international co-operation, automatic data processing and special problems.
- 6.1.3 Third United Nations Conference on the Standardization of Geographical Names, Athens, 17 August - 7 September 1977, ed. by the ECOSOC of the U.N.
- Vol. 1, Report of the Conference, document E/CONF. 69/4, New York, 1979, 65 pp.
Contents: Summary of the work, resolutions adopted, list of documents issued for the conference.
- Vol. 2, not yet published.

- 6.2 Reports of the United Nations Group of Experts on Geographical Names
- 6.2.1 Report of the Group of Experts on Geographical Names, prepared during the meeting held in New York from 20 June to 1 July 1960.
World Cartography, ed. by the ECOSOC, vol. VII, pp. 7 - 18. New York 1962.
Contents: Need for standarization, problems of domestic standardization, 21 recommendations etc.
- 6.2.2 Preparatory Meeting for the United Nations Conference on the Standardization of geographical Names: Report of the Group of Experts on Geographical Names. In the publication mentioned under 6.1.1, vol. 2, pp. 20 - 24.
Contents: Objectives of conference, relation of national standardization to international standardization, geographical terms, writing systems, international co-operation, list of national authorities dealing with geographical names etc.
- 6.2.3 First Session of the Ad Hoc Group of Experts on Geographical Names, Geneva, 22 September 1967.
No report edited. Objective: Recognition of the necessity of a Group of Experts.
- 6.2.4 Report of the Ad Hoc Group of Experts on Geographical Names on its Second Session from 10 to 20 March 1970 (New York), U.N. document ESA/RT/C/GN/1 of 29 April 1970, 22 pp.
Contents: Aims and functions, minority languages, undersea features, African languages, extraterrestrial topographic names, unwritten languages, romanization systems etc.
- 6.2.5 Report of the Ad Hoc Group of Experts on Geographical Names on its Third Session (New York, from 2 to 12 February 1971).
U.N. document ESA/RT/C/GN/2 of 11 March 1971, 25 pp.
Contents: Report on regional authorities, organization of the Second Conference, reports of 4 working groups etc.
- 6.2.6 Report of the United Nations Group of Experts on Geographical Names at its Fourth Session (London, on 9 May and 1 June 1972).
No U.N. document. Paper available at the U.N. Cartography Section. 8 pp.
Contents: Gazetteers, programm of the group, training courses etc.
- 6.2.7 Report of the United Nations Group of Experts on Geographical Names at its Fifth Session from 5 - 16 March 1973 (New York).
U.N. document ESA/RT/C/GN/3 of 16 March 1973, 44 pp.
Contents: International gazetteers, names beyond a single sovereignty, training courses, exonyms, international co-operation, 6 reports of working groups, list of 42 working papers.

- 6.2.8 Report of the United Nations Group of Experts on Geographical Names on the Work of its Sixth Session (New York, from 5 - 26 March 1975). U.N. document ESA/RT/C/GN/4 of 17 June 1975, 44 pp.
Contents: Reduction of exonyms, training courses, reports of 7 working groups, list of documents (57 working papers, 6 information papers).
- 6.2.9 Report of the United Nations Group of Experts on Geographical Names on the Work of its Seventh Session (Athens on 16 August und 8 September 1977).
U.N. document ESA/RT/C/GN/5 of 1 December 1977. 9 pp.
Contents: program for future work, special tasks of the working groups, election of officers etc.
- 6.2.10 Report of the United Nations Group of Experts on Geographical Names on the Work of its Eighth Session (New York, 26 February - 9 March 1979).
U.N. document ESA/RT/C/GN/6 of 30 March 1979, 27 pp.
Contents: Review of divisional composition, reduction of exonyms, names of features beyone a single sovereignty, definitions, romanization systems, gazetteers, training courses, extraterrestrial topographic features, list of country names, undersea and maritime features, automated data processing, list of 57 working papers etc.