
United Nations
Group of Experts on
Geographical Names

Eighteenth Session
Geneva, 12-23 August 1996

Opening Statement of the Secretary*)

Mr. Chairman,
Ladies and Gentlemen,

Welcome to the United Nations Office at Geneva. Two years ago we convened on the banks of the East River, today our Session takes us to the shores of beautiful Lake Geneva.

On behalf of Ms. Beatrice Labonne, Director of the Division for Environment Management and Social Development, UN/DDSMS, who could not be with us today, I would like to stress how important this meeting of the Group of Experts on Geographical Names is to the on-going work of the United Nations.

We shall be here together for 10 working days for the Eighteenth Session of the United Nations Group of Experts on Geographical Names and for one weekend in-between, and I hope this will give you some opportunity to explore the town of Geneva and the beautiful surrounding Swiss and French landscapes.

* submitted by the Secretariat

The Secretariat of the Group has since the last Session kept contact with the Experts of this Group by sending out a Newsletter from time to time and by corresponding with them individually, whenever required. - The Secretariat also had numerous inquiries from other people interested in various aspects of the Standardization of Geographical Names. Some of these inquiries we could answer directly, others we had to refer to the Geographic - Linguistic Divisions or to the country concerned. This in particular, when the questions posed concerned purely National Standardization.

In this connection may I make a suggestion: Beginning from its First Session, the Group saw it as an important goal, to encourage the establishment of National Establishments for the Standardization of Geographical Names. Many countries now have these Establishments or Names Boards or whatever they are called in individual countries. The Group has helped to establish these Boards in some cases in Developing Countries. This is the suggestion: Could we not draft a list of all existing National Names Standardization Committees with names of contact persons, addresses, telephone, fax and e-mail numbers? This list could be maintained and up-dated by the Secretariat and could be published from time to time in the Newsletter and also possibly in other publications. This would help to direct interested people to the right "Names Authorities".

As you may know, The United Nations has been in an extremely difficult financial situation for the last 3

years or so , which was caused mainly by non-payment of the assessed contributions of some of the Member States. In addition, the Member States have in 1996-97 required the Secretary-General of the United Nations to operate with a zero growth budget. As a result the activities of the United Nations Secretariat had to be streamlined and staff posts reduced.

The Secretariat of the Group of Experts has not been spared from this process. Although working with you is both challenging and rewarding, I count on your assistance to facilitate my task here in Geneva, particularly, since I do not have the logistical support of the past. - This logistical support that we have enjoyed in the past, is no longer available to us. We have been required to operate on the basis of a zero budget provision.

The Committee on Natural Resources (CNR), an expert body, which is also reporting to the Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC), has recommended, that all meetings that lasted in the past for two weeks or ten working days, should be reduced in future to eight working days. The ECOSOC has approved this recommendation. This is another example of measures taken to utilize the scarce resources of the United Nations in a more economic manner. The number of reports has also been drastically reduced.

The Secretariat is also involved in the preparation and servicing of the United Nations Regional Cartographic Conferences for Asia and the Pacific, which will take place in February 1997 in Bangkok, and for the Americas, which will take place in

June 1997 in New York. Last but not least, there are Training Courses and Seminars to be organized, that cover various aspects of Surveying, Mapping, Cartography, as well as Geographical Names.

The next "big event" that we are looking forward to, will be the Seventh United Nations Conference on the Standardization of Geographical Names, planned to be held next year in Iran. The present Session will have to "prepare" this Conference, review the provisional Agenda and set some "priorities" for agenda items of this Conference. For this Session of the Group we have a special item of the agenda, where we will deal particularly with this forthcoming Conference.

You will remember, that at the last Session 2 years ago, it was my wish and my hope, that we could complete the Information Brochure on the work of the Group and on the importance of International Standardization of Geographical Names. Two years ago we could not finalize it, because there were still a number of open questions. I really hope that we will make it this time!

A much more complicated task is the work on the Dictionary of Toponymic Terminology and its translation into the official languages of the United Nations. Again, we will discuss this very important issue under a special item of the agenda. I consider the progress on this work as most important, since it forms the basis of the entire work on the standardization of place names.

I wish you a successful Eighteenth Session. Thank you.

\UNGEGN18.DIR\OPENING.STC