

Experts Prepare Global List of Country Names and Recognise Value of Using Internet

The United Nations Group of Experts on Geographical Names concluded its 18th session in Geneva today with the submission of a document bringing together for the first time in this format, the names of each country in the world in its original national form, a romanized version and the country's official and short names in the working languages of the United Nations: English, French and Spanish.

The document is being circulated for further comments and corrections and will be presented at the Seventh Conference on the Standardization of Geographical Names to be held at Tehran in September, 1997.

Such lists are made possible by using internationally-agreed systems of transliteration providing a standardized and accepted way of rendering non-Roman scripts into the Roman script. The 18th session of the Group of Experts finalised new transliteration tables for Thailand, Pakistan (Urdu) and Iran (Farsee). This brings the number of transliteration systems agreed by the experts to 13.

The meeting considered 102 working papers covering the main areas of the Group's concerns. These include training courses in toponymy*, toponymic terminology, romanization systems and standardization.

The Geneva meeting was attended by 90 experts representing 17 linguistic/geographical divisions from 45 countries. The Chairman of the Group, Mr Peter Raper of South Africa noted with regret the absence of sub-Saharan states and the small number from Latin America.

However, he said this was largely due to a lack of resources as there is a growing awareness of the value of agreeing on national standards for place names, especially in states where more than one language is in common use or officially recognised. The Group had received reports on training courses held since the last meeting in China, Latin America and South Africa.

"Where there isn't a centrally coordinated standards-setting body you find similar work done by different departments leading to overlap, waste, ambiguity and confusion as some places are known by different names or the same names may have different spellings," Mr Raper argued, citing South Africa's emphasis on standard names especially after it moved from having two official languages to now having eleven.

The Group emphasises the importance of accepted national standards and promotes national names for use internationally. One of its aims is to reduce the use of "exonyms" which are foreign names for places eg Genf, Ginebra and Geneva are exonyms for Geneve.

This year's meeting recognised the immense potential of the Internet for providing an efficient and easily updated list of geographical names to a broad audience and increasing awareness of the importance of standardized place names.

"It provides us with a way to let more and more people know about our programmes," says the Group's deputy chair, Helen Kerfoot of Canada, "so instead of being in the attic we'll be out front and visible. Standardization such as we offer will also be essential for people searching the Internet and those maintaining indexes, who depend on a universally accepted standard spelling."

Although one of the less well known areas of the United Nations' work, the Group of Experts, and the five yearly conferences work, is crucial for map and atlas production, air traffic, tourism, population census and national statistics, urban and regional planning as well as many areas of trade and commerce. The emergence in the 1990s of many states following the break up of the former Soviet Union has added additional challenges to the work of the Group.

Webster's dictionary defines toponymy as "the study of names derived from the name of a place".