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English only

**Eighth United Nations Conference on the
Standardization of Geographical Names**

Berlin, 27 August-5 September 2002

Item 11 of the provisional agenda*

**Reports on programmes to assist with pronunciation
of names**

**Proposal for the establishment of a working group on the
pronunciation of geographical names**

Submitted by Israel**

* E/CONF.94/1.

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Introduction

Every geographical name has normally two forms, (a) the spoken or orally pronounced form, (b) the written form. These are expressed in two different modes, the first in oral communication, the second graphically in one or more writing systems. Even if one refers to officially approved endonyms, the written form can assume different realizations not only in multilingual areas but, when transliterated into numerous writing systems "foreign" to those of the country of origin of the name.

The standardization of geographical names, which is the function and charge of the United Nations Group of Experts on Geographical Names, requires not only the approval of a written form by the national toponymic authority concerned, but also the standardization of transliteration systems into other writing systems and scripts. This latter task is being performed admirably by the Working Group on Romanization (convenor: Mr. Peeter Päll). The work of this Group is of importance, among others, to editors of maps, atlases and other publications involving geographical names in Roman script, but also to those editors of maps and atlases in non-Roman scripts who use romanized maps and atlases as the basis for their work.

The problem of pronunciation

However, romanization and transliteration in general do not solve a basic problem, namely how a speaker of language x should pronounce names he reads in the romanized forms of script y . Three examples will demonstrate this.

(1) The French editor of a tourist map of Spain wishes to inform the users of his map who have to ask for road directions how to pronounce names having the digraph ll or the diacritic \tilde{n} in them. It would be of advantage if he added a Spanish-to-French pronunciation guide in the map legend.

(2) The English editor of an officially-romanized map of Russia must instruct readers of the map for example that ξ is pronounced as English sh . A pronunciation table would make this clear.

(3) The editor of "Toponymic guidelines for map editors and other editors" in country z wishes to convey to readers how geographical names in his country are pronounced, and to do this for the working languages of the United Nations. Again, a pronunciation guide for the three U.N. working languages would supply the solution.

In the past, the problem of pronunciation of geographical names was raised only in a somewhat vague formulation, and the only resolution mentioning it was Resolution No. 7 of the Third United Nations Conference on the Standardization of Geographical Names (Athens, 1977), based on paragraph 83 in the Report of the Conference (E./CONF.69/4, p. 22). This resolution recommended

"that the Group of Experts consider the nature and design of research and experimentation that may help to establish the range of pronunciation."

In the following schematization, let us denote the number of different scripts by the letter m , and the number of languages by n . Romanization is a vectorial operation with m tables. Pronunciation guides, on the other hand, are a matrix operation with basically $m \times n$ tables. Strictly speaking, only $t = (m \times n) - n$ or $t = (n - 1) \times m$ tables are required, because the guides for the pronunciation of any particular script in its own language would be redundant. In practice, t may vary because of several languages using the same script.

Producing such pronunciation tables can be considered chiefly at three levels of extent or complexity. The first level would be to prepare tables only for speakers of English, which would result in $t_1 = m \times 1 = m$ tables (just as in romanization). The second level would entail pronunciation tables for the working languages of the United Nations, i.e. $t_2 = m \times 3 = 3m$ tables. The highest level would provide tables for n languages and m scripts and would result in $t_3 = (m \times n) - m = (n - 1) \times m$ tables.

Proposal

It is considered that preparing adequate pronunciation tables or guides should be the task of a Working Group on the Pronunciation of Geographical Names within the United Nations Group of Experts on Geographical Names, to be composed of experts with a working knowledge of, and interest in, diverse scripts and languages and their respective pronunciations.

Draft Resolution

The Conference,

Noting that a geographical name has both an oral and a written form;

Noting also that the transliteration of geographical names from the script of one language into another script (with or without diacritical marks), such as romanization, does not normally provide a guide to the correct pronunciation of such names by persons who are unacquainted with the source language;

Further noting that already the Third United Nations Conference on the Standardization of Geographical Names recommended taking up the subject of pronunciation;

Recommends that a Working Group on the Pronunciation of Geographical Names be established within the United Nations Group of Experts on Geographical Names.
