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**Opening Remarks  
2021 Session of the United Nations Group of Experts  
on Geographical Names  
Virtual, 3 May 2021**

Excellencies,  
Chair of the Group of Experts on Geographical Names,  
Members of the UNGEGN Bureau,  
Distinguished Experts,  
Colleagues,

I am delighted to be with you at this 2021 “second” session of the United Nations Group of Experts on Geographical Names and am particularly honoured to deliver the opening remarks on behalf of the Under-Secretary-General of DESA, Mr. Liu Zhenmin.

The Statistics Division of DESA has a unique position and role of providing secretariat services for three intergovernmental bodies of ECOSOC. They are the Statistical Commission, the Committee of Experts on Global Geospatial Information Management, and the Group of Experts on Geographical Names. All three are technical/expert bodies, with core responsibilities for the collection, standardization and dissemination of data. These are statistical and geospatial data, including geographical names - which are fundamental to making informed decisions, and measuring and monitoring the sustainable development goals as well as other UN policy agendas. I am pleased to note that increasingly our Governments, Director Generals, CEO’s and Head of Commerce have become aware of the fundamental importance of collecting, managing and disseminating data in support of national development, and are making the necessary investments to become data-driven in their operations. The same is true for the United Nations Secretariat where the Secretary General has launched last year a “Data Strategy for Action by Everyone, Everywhere”. Notwithstanding the devastating effects of the COVID-19 pandemic on health, the society, and national economies, it has yielded positive outcomes. Governments have had to rapidly adopt innovative technologies, ramp up and deploy e-commerce solutions and leverage statistical and geospatial data to manage and monitor all phases of the pandemic and to enable business continuity. Despite this increasing awareness and use of data and technologies, the importance and benefits of geographical names standardization and romanization<sup>1</sup> is not well known and understood by others in related disciplines and is often taken for granted.

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<sup>1</sup> Romanization → Conversion from non-Roman into Roman → script. Examples: Αθήνα → Athína; Москва → Moskva; תל-אביב → Tel-Aviv; ニホン → Nihon.

Wherever we go in the world and whatever we do – walking around town, using Uber, surfing the internet, or shopping for groceries – we encounter names of places. They surround us, providing us not only with a sense of place but also with a means of finding our way about, searching for information and organizing the world we live in. Datasets of geographic names have a direct relationship with all other data themes. Authoritative naming of locations and geographic names are vital to supporting humanitarian aid, protection of life and property, responses to climate change, food provision, urban planning, infrastructure development, tourism, promoting indigenous rights and reconciliation and many more.

Distinguished Experts,

I have come to learn that geographical names are “sine qua non”, for location and identification. Geographical names underpin data collection, monitoring and analysis and therefore are undoubtedly necessary for managing and monitoring the SDG’s. I am heartened to learn that the theme for your 2021 session “Geographical Names Supporting Sustainable Development and Management of the Pandemic” is modelled on that for ECOSOC’s 2021 High Level Political Forum on SDG follow-up and review. I was equally delighted to learn that your body submitted three case studies provided by experts from Austria, Indonesia, and Saudi Arabia, that showcased the importance of standardized geographical names in the management of the COVID-19 Pandemic.

One case highlighted that the COVID-19 pandemic and the related travel restrictions urged the need to harmonize/standardize names of Austria’s geographic features that crossed the borders of adjoining countries of Italy, Slovenia, Hungary, Slovakia and Czechia. The case demonstrated that feature names, which may have previously been considered “unimportant”, can become essential overnight and that it would have been an advantage to apply the principles of place-name standardization in advance. It also demonstrated the importance and benefits of cooperation between national geographical names boards and mapping agencies as well as among national names boards of neighboring countries.

Distinguished Experts,

UNDESA is aware that supporting geographical names standardization at the national level is a key mandate of the Group of Experts. We are also aware of the good work that has been done over the Group’s rich history to increase the level of geographical names standardization, which remains a challenge. Only about half of the Member States of the United Nations have a designated national geographical names authority. In this regard, I acknowledge the current exercise ably led by your Bureau, over the past two years, to develop the draft strategic plan and programme of work 2021-2029. This draft document I understand has been prepared at an appropriate juncture in the revitalization and renewal of the Group of Experts and will be presented for approval during this session. This exercise is in line with our objectives to improve the outcomes of subsidiary bodies to make them more relevant, coherent and solution oriented to address implementation challenges. I wish the Group of Experts success in its deliberations to have the document adopted. I am told that the preparation process was robust, transparent, and inclusive, with the input from the global UNGEGN community through three rounds of global consultations and a virtual side event which resulted in a comprehensive living document.

Distinguished Experts,

In closing, I note that commitment and collective action are required to achieve the vision of every country having a fully functioning and globally-aligned structure and policy framework, based on common principles for national standardization of authorized geographical names that identify location and respect the associated culture and heritage. Be assured that DESA is strongly committed to strengthening the role of the Group of Experts to enhance their contribution to implementing the 2030 Agenda and stands ready to support the Group in the implementation of its plan and programme of work.

I wish you productive deliberations and a successful 2021 session. I do look forward to learning about your session decisions and more on the impact of your work.

Thank you for having me.