

UN Telecom Chief 'Surprised' by US-Led Treaty Snub

Brian Murphy, Associated Press

DUBAI, United Arab Emirates (AP) — Envoys from nearly 90 nations signed Friday the first new U.N. telecommunications treaty since the Internet age, but the U.S. and other Western nations refused to join after claiming it endorses greater government control over cyberspace.

The head of the U.N. telecoms group pushed back against the American assertions, defending the accord as necessary to help expand online services to poorer nations and add more voices to shape the direction of modern communications technology.

Hamadoun Toure's remarks highlighted the wide gaps and hard-fought positions during the past 10 days of global talks in Dubai.

The negotiations essentially pitted the West's desire to preserve the unregulated nature of the Net against developing countries yearning for better Web access and strong-arm states such as Iran and China that closely filter cyberspace.

The final break late Thursday was not over specific regulations in the U.N. group's first telecoms review since before the Internet was a global force. Instead, it came down to an ideological split over the nature of the Internet and who is responsible for its growth and governance.

More than 20 countries joined the U.S. on Friday in refusing to sign the protocols by the U.N.'s International Telecommunications Union, or ITU, claiming it opens the door to greater government controls of the Net and could be used by authoritarian states to justify further crackdowns on cyberspace.

Rival countries — including Iran, China and African states — insist the governments should have a greater sway over Internet affairs and seek to break a perceived Western grip on information technology. They also favor greater international help to bring reliable online links to the world's least developed regions.

The ITU — which dates to the age of the telegraph in the mid-19th century — has no technical powers to change how the Internet operates or force countries to follow its nonbinding accords, which also dealt with issues such as mobile phone roaming rates and international emergency numbers.

But the U.S. and its backers worry that the new treaty could alter the tone of debates on the Internet. Instead of viewing it as a freeform network, they claim, it could increasingly be seen as a commodity that needs clear lines of oversight.

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"A free and open Internet with limited restrictions has been critical to its development into one of the greatest tools for empowering people to connect and share information globally," said U.S. Rep. Zoe Lofgren, who represents part of Silicon Valley, in a statement from Washington.

"But there are countries and groups who wish to exert greater control over the Internet in order to restrict or censor it for political or cultural reasons," she added. "We need to stand firm against those kinds of threats if we want the Internet to continue as a vibrant engine for innovation, human rights, cultural and economic growth."

In a testament to the contentious atmosphere at the Dubai negotiations, the pages of reservations and comments by various countries were far longer than the treaty itself.

In the end, it was supported by 89 countries in the 193-member U.N. telecoms union. Fifty-five did not sign, including the U.S.-led bloc of more than 20 nations, and others needing home country approval. The remainder did not have high-ranking envoys in Dubai.

Toure, the group's secretary-general, said he was "very much surprised" by the U.S.-led snub after days of difficult negotiations that dropped or softened wording that troubled the West.

Yet it fell short of American-led demands that all references to the Internet — even indirect or couched in general language — be omitted.

Even an issue such as unsolicited email "spam" brought division. Efforts to try to address blanket electronic message barrages was seen by American envoys and others as something governments could use as possible U.N. cover for increased surveillance on email traffic.

"Fundamental divides were exposed," said Lynn St. Amour, CEO and president of the Internet Society, an industry group.

Toure framed it as clash of "two societies" of the Internet age: Citizens of wealthy countries able to access the Net and 4.5 billion others in poor nations on the other side of the so-called digital divide.

"We are defending here the right to communicate as a basic human right. That's something very important in the ITU. We so remind our members constantly of that obligation," he told reporters.

He also said there was no specific endorsement of "Internet control or Internet governance." The U.S. and backers said the general acknowledgment of a government stake in 21st century telecommunications was just as troubling as any specific wording.

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"Internet policy should not be determined by member states, but by citizens, communities and broader society ... the private sector and civil society," the head of the U.S. delegation, Terry Kramer, told the gathering late Thursday, "That has not happened here."

On Friday, Toure said it was impossible and illogical to ignore the Net.

"If the word Internet was used frequently here in Dubai, it is simply a reflection of the reality of the modern world," said Toure, a Russian-trained engineer from Mali. "Telecommunication networks are not just used for making voice calls, so our two worlds are linked."

Overshadowed by the Internet showdowns were other details in the pact. They include agreements that could lower mobile phone roaming charges, pledges to invest more communications infrastructure in poorer countries, efforts for greater communication technology for the disabled and a move to create a common emergency number for mobile phones and other devices.

Either the 911 or 112 number will be picked in later talks.

It's unclear whether countries that rejected the pact could benefit from possible changes such as lower roaming rates when the accord takes effect in 2015.

"Some really good stuff" in the accord, said a Twitter post by .nxt, a website following Internet policy. But it said the disputes over possible Internet controls forced the U.S and others "to bail" out on the deal.

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