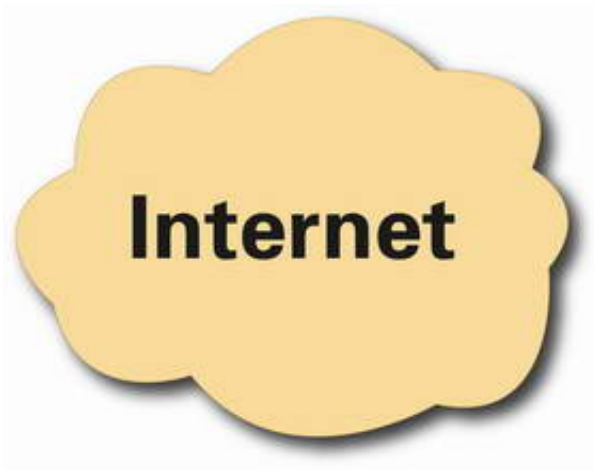# Nations prepare to fight for Internet

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As the United States and Europe prepare to slug it out over the ownership of the Internet at the upcoming United Nations conference on information technology, there is growing concern that the World Wide Web is being excessively politicized, and that might hamper its innovative driving force.

The three-day world summit brings together over 10,000 participants not only from governments, but also from the private sector and non-profit organizations, ostensibly to bridge the digital divide between poorer countries and industrialized nations. It kicks off Wednesday in Tunis.

The topic that has most piqued the interest of the richer nations has been

whether or not the United States should have ultimate control of the Internet. The California-based Internet Cooperation for Assigned Names and Numbers, which has the final say in naming domains, is in turn controlled by regulations drawn up by the U.S. Department of Commerce.

As a result, those who are opposed to U.S. dominance, including the European Union, have been pressing for an international agency led by the United Nations effectively to take over the functions of ICANN. Opponents of ICANN dominance have also criticized the distinctly English-based nature of the Internet and have called for use of other major languages as well.

Indeed, the head of the International Telecommunications Union, which is part of the U.N. system and the organizer of the Tunis conference, said last month at a press briefing that the ITU would able to handle the responsibility and have the technological capability to do so.

"If we were asked to," ITU could take ICANN's place, said Yoshio Utsumi.

Meanwhile, the U.N. Secretary General Kofi Annan said that while his agency had no interest in taking over the Web, there was a need for more global dialogues on Internet governance.

In an op-ed piece in the Washington Post last week, Annan stated that "everyone acknowledges the need for more international participation in discussions of Internet government. The disagreement is over how to achieve this. So let's set aside fears of U.N. 'designs' on the Internet. The U.N. wants only to promote dialogue and consensus among all stakeholders."

Indeed, the World Bank said in a report on e-development released also

last week ahead of the conference that the "digital divide is very much part of the broader development divide."

"Improving policies and institutions to encourage investment in (information technology network) applications while extending access to telecommunications infrastructure can dramatically extend use of e-commerce at a given level of income per capita. This underlines the importance both of the basic telecommunications reform agenda as well as a broader effort to improve the climate for e-development," the bank said.

Certainly, there is no doubt that developing nations could benefit from greater access to information technology, including the Internet. Yet some analysts question whether changing the existing system will actually be good for the World Wide Web's development in the long run.

"The Internet happened as an accident, and it blossomed into something that no one envisioned," argued Usha Haley, director of the global business center at the University of New Haven. "And so far, its development has been going okay, and developing fast."

While she noted that the question of ownership of the Internet may be a sore point for those countries that are opposed to U.S. dominance in the field, she pointed out that the United States has been the pioneer in the network, and English has become the lingua franca of the Web as a result.

"The growth of the Internet has been strong because it's not managed, and the United States is best at keeping it that way," Haley said.

Reporters sans frontieres, a non-profit group that advocates press freedom, agreed that changing the existing system would be a bad idea.

"The situation can certainly be criticized, but the proposed remedies seem much worse," the group said in a news release. "The simple fact of holding of WSIS in Tunisia, whose president and his family control the national media and Internet access with an iron grip, shows that freedom of expression is not seen as a key issue at the summit," it added.

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