

4 countries clear hurdle for non-Latin Web names

January 21 2010, By ANICK JESDANUN , AP Technology Writer

(AP) -- Egypt, Russia, Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates are the first countries to win preliminary approval for Internet addresses written entirely in their native scripts.

Since their creation in the 1980s, Internet domain names have been limited to the 26 characters in the Latin alphabet used in English, as well as 10 numerals and the hyphen. Technical tricks have been used to allow portions of the Internet address to use other scripts, but until now, the suffix had to use those 37 characters.

An announcement Thursday by the Internet Corporation for Assigned Names and Numbers, known as ICANN, paves the way for an entire domain name to appear in Cyrillic or Arabic by the middle of this year. Applications for strings in other languages are pending.

That means Internet users with little or no knowledge of English would no longer have to type Latin characters to access Web pages targeting Russian or Arabic speakers. Although search engines can sometimes help users reach those sites, companies still need to include Latin characters on advertisements.

Users may still need Latin characters for e-mail addresses, though, as Internet technicians finalize standards for e-mail applications that can understand domain names entirely in Cyrillic or Arabic.

ICANN granted preliminary approval to the four countries after years of

debate and testing of non-Latin names. Demand for them has been increasing around the world as Internet usage expands among people of different tongues.

Some countries have been issuing domain names partially in non-Latin scripts - with only the suffix using Latin characters. But Egypt, Russia, Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates have not, said Tina Dam, senior director for ICANN's Internationalized Domain Names program.

For the three Arabic-speaking countries, there would have been too much confusion because their language is written right to left, while the Latin portion would be left to right. For Russian, the concern was that Cyrillic and Latin characters looked too similar and would create confusion if mixed in a single Internet address.

These four countries now have to formally request the suffixes, and ICANN's board has to sign off. That's expected now that the ICANN staff has cleared the proposed suffixes to make sure they won't cause technical problems or confusion with existing Latin domain names.

Those suffixes are:

- The equivalent of "Egypt" in Arabic.
- "RF" for the Russian Federation, written in Cyrillic.
- The Arabic equivalent of "AlSaudiah," short for Saudi Arabia.
- "Emirates" written in Arabic for the UAE.

All four countries would keep their current two-character Latin suffix - ".eg" for Egypt, ".ru" for Russia, ".sa" for Saudi Arabia and ".ae" for the Emirates.

ICANN has received applications from 16 countries in eight languages since mid-November. Officials would not release details on the ones still under review.

More information: Chart on approved applications:
<http://bit.ly/4Fso2T>

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