

New Net domains break language barriers

May 24 2010, By TAREK EL-TABLAWY , AP Business Writer

(AP) -- The use of non-Latin characters in Internet addresses is a key step to opening up the Web and making it more "personalized" for billions of users, the head of the nonprofit body that oversees Internet addresses said Monday.

Rod Beckstrom, CEO of the [Internet Corporation for Assigned Names and Numbers](#), said around half of the people using the Internet do not use Latin script. But the recent approval of Arabic and Russian characters for domain name suffixes will help bridge that linguistic barrier and encourage more users online, he said.

"This is part of the Internet becoming more truly global," Beckstrom told The Associated Press on the sidelines of an event celebrating the introduction of such suffixes in Arabic. "We see this just opening up and making the Internet more global."

"It seems to be a more important offering for the psyche of people. Our language is part of our culture and our identity, and having ... the ability to express our domain in our chosen language is something that people feel very powerfully about," Beckstrom said.

Earlier this month, Egypt, Saudi Arabia, the [United Arab Emirates](#) and Russia become the first nations to get Internet addresses entirely in non-Latin characters.

Egypt, for example, secured the right to the ".masr" domain (written in Arabic).

The step marked a fundamental shift in the Internet domain name system since its creation in the 1980s.

Until the approvals were received for Arabic and Russian, websites had to end their addresses with suffixes like ".com" that were written in [Latin characters](#) - a restriction that posed challenges to expanding the reach of the Net to people who could not read such script.

Beckstrom, in comments echoed earlier by Egypt's Information Technology Minister Tarek Kamel, said lifting the language barrier would allow new and unprecedented access to the Internet.

Kamel told reporters earlier Monday that of the 60 million mobile device users in Egypt, only about 17 million were online. The new system would greatly boost those numbers, he said.

"Now we have a stronger reason for inclusion, for bringing them and making them part of this revolution that is happening worldwide," Kamel said.

Beckstrom said that Arabic is the seventh most common language currently on the Internet.

That figure reflects the rapid growth in Internet use in the Mideast, where technical issues and political constraints have at time served as serious impediments to the expansion of the Web in the region.

While Egypt was among the first to submit an application last year for the new domains, other nations have jumped in, as well.

ICANN said it has received a total of 21 requests for such domains, representing 11 languages, since it began accepting applications in November.

Beckstrom declined to say when additional approvals could be made, noting that the process of setting up the domains took years of technical and policy work.

"It takes some energy to do the work on the technical script selection," he said, listing just one of the challenges countries must tackle before getting their domains approved.

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