Deep divides in Dubai at UN talks on Internet (Update 2)

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Talks over possible new U.N. regulations for the Internet were deeply divided Monday, with Russia and others advocating for more government control, while a U.S.-led bloc warned against rules that could restrict freedoms in cyberspace.

The Dubai conference, which wraps up later this week, is not empowered to bring about any immediate changes on how the Internet operates. But the U.S. and its backers argue that sanctioning greater government roles in Internet oversight could allow governments that already heavily censor Web traffic, such as China or Iran, to justify more restrictions and monitoring.

A high-powered U.S. delegation—including representatives from tech giants such as Google Inc. and Microsoft Corp.—has tried to block all discussions of possible Internet regulations. The effort, however, has met strong resistance from countries such as Russia that want a greater control over Net commerce and security.

So far, the closed-door talks have failed to find much common ground at the 193-nation U.N. International Telecommunications Union, which last updated its rules in 1988, long before the Internet became a global force.

"What's happened in the conference is a variety of proposals have come in from other nations that get into the Internet, that look at Internet governance," said the head of the 123-member U.S. delegation, Ambassador Terry Kramer, in a video uploaded by organizers late

Sunday. "It creates an open door for review of content and potential censorship there. It will create a chilling environment for the Internet."

For several days, U.S.-led envoys fought against a proposal submitted by the host United Arab Emirates, which last month passed sweeping new Internet laws outlawing social media posts that insult rulers or call for protests.

The proposal—backed by Russia, China and other Arab states—was removed from discussion Monday, conference organizers said, after an uproar from Web activists who support the American position. Among its provisions was a call for governments to have "equal rights to manage the Internet," including its technical workings, according to a text leaked by a website, wcitleaks.org. The site claimed to have access to meeting documents not yet made public.

It's unclear, however, whether the American views have gained the upper hand as the talks move into their final days. U.S. officials say other proposals that support a greater government voice in Internet affairs are still active.

"These issues will continue to be on the table for discussions in other forms during the remainder of the conference," said Kramer.

Many experts on Internet technology believe the proposals could further squeeze the Net in countries where it is already closely regulated, even though it won't fundamentally alter cyberspace practices in places with traditions of openness.

"These proposals would break what's working—freedom of information and freedom of access," tech analyst Elise Ackerman wrote in a column for Forbes. "And they wouldn't help fix the parts of the Internet that need reinforcing, namely security and privacy."

She noted that the conference reflects a general push for more "international policymaking" as the U.S. dominance of the Internet weakens.

On Monday, the head of the U.N. telecoms agency, Hamadoun Toure, was scheduled to meet with civil society groups who have complained of being excluded from the talks.

Other issues at the conference also remain unresolved, including a European-led proposal to charge content providers for access to cross-border markets. The idea is strongly opposed by U.S. companies such as Google, Facebook Inc., Amazon.com Inc. and others. Supporters say the so-called "toll" could be used by developing countries to fund expansion of Internet services.

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