Internet pioneer leaves oversight group

By ANICK JESDANUN, AP Internet Writer
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NEW YORK - In the 1970s, Vint Cerf played a leading role in developing the Internet's technical foundation. For the past seven years, he's faced the more daunting task of leading a key agency that oversees his creation.

After fending off an international rebellion and planting the seeds for streamlining operations, Cerf is stepping down this week as chairman of the Internet Corporation of Assigned Names and Numbers.

"My sentence is up," Cerf said with his characteristic sense of humor, which he and others credit for helping him steer the organization through several high-profile battles from which it emerged more stable and stronger.

Cerf, 64, who's also a senior executive at Internet search leader Google Inc., joined ICANN in 1999, a year after its formation to oversee domain names and other Internet addressing policies. Cerf was elected chairman in 2000 and leaves the unpaid position after Friday's board meeting in Los Angeles because of term limits.

When he joined the board, many questioned whether ICANN would survive. Now — though some people still complain that ICANN is arbitrary, secretive and slow — the focus is more on improving it than replacing it.

Under Cerf, the organization withstood power struggles and ballooned in size. It also has shown signs of movement on key issues: After years of debate, for instance, it is now beginning to create mechanisms for more easily adding Internet addresses, including domain names in languages besides English.

"In some respects it has gained credibility," Cerf said. "It is now part of the Internet universe as opposed to a thing that was open to some serious debate."

That has been particularly so since ICANN, teaming with the U.S. diplomats, resisted efforts by China, Brazil and other developing countries to replace the group with a more
U.N.-like organization over which world governments would have greater control.

Among other things, ICANN critics wanted quicker action on addresses in other languages, saying the current restrictions are akin to requiring all English speakers to type in Chinese. Many foreign governments also resented the U.S. government's veto power over the Marina del Rey, Calif.-based nonprofit agency.

Calls to strip ICANN — and the United States — of its oversight of domain names, which are key for computers to find Web sites and route e-mails, grew as world leaders gathered in Geneva for the 2003 U.N. World Summit on the Information Society. The European Union even joined by the time the summit convened again in 2005, in Tunis, Tunisia.

But ICANN ultimately emerged intact.

Credit goes to many people besides Cerf, yet many say he had the gravitas to meet with heads of states and senior ministers — and tell them, "no."

"He has a certain star quality," said Paul Twomey, ICANN's chief executive since 2003. "He can open a door. He can talk to anybody. He can say, 'Me and my colleagues actually invented the Internet and here's how it works.' There was a lot of ignorance, and he was able to say, 'It just doesn't work the way you think it works.'"

Cerf tested the first Internet hookups in 1969 when he was a graduate student at UCLA. As a professor at Stanford University in the 1970s, Cerf led a team that invented the protocols, known as TCP/IP, that now serve as the Internet's basic communications tools.

Known since as one of the Internet's founding fathers, Cerf continued working on Internet technology at the U.S. Defense Advanced Research Projects Agency and later developed MCI Mail, the Internet's first commercial e-mail service. Google lured him in 2005 to be its "chief Internet evangelist" and gave him an office a few doors from CEO Eric Schmidt.

In 1997, then-President Clinton presented Cerf and TCP/IP co-inventor Robert Kahn the National Medal of Technology, and in 2005 President Bush gave the pair the Presidential Medal of Freedom.

As ICANN chairman, Cerf has played a hands-on role, attending many committee meetings and workshops in his trademark three-piece suit, often asking questions and contributing his know-how.

Jeffrey Eckhaus, a business development director at domain registration company Register.com Inc., found him "very knowledgeable about every single topic that would go on. He would really know all the ins and outs."

Besides his sense of humor and his technical knowledge, Cerf brought business and administrative acumen, many ICANN participants say. He has a slew of anecdotes ready and has displayed a willingness to listen to concerns and "engage with people from heads of states down to university students," Twomey said.

Now that Cerf has guided ICANN from nearly its inception through a tumultuous adolescence and into early adulthood, many believe it's time for an ICANN driven more by procedures than personality.
"It doesn't demean Cerf's towering legacy to say people are ready for a change," said Milton Mueller, a Syracuse University professor and frequent ICANN critic.

The short list of potential successors includes telecommunications expert Roberto Gaetano and lawyer Peter Dengate Thrush. Both have been active with ICANN, but neither has Cerf's name recognition or long-standing ties to the Internet.

"The bad news is we're not going to find another Vint," said Steve Crocker, a high school classmate of Cerf's and fellow Internet pioneer. "It's equally a form of good news. We're now going to go through a period where ordinary mortals are managing things."

Even with Cerf's clout, ICANN has had its share of battles. For one, a decision to reverse preliminary support for a proposed ".xxx" domain name for porn sites was criticized as arbitrary and politically influenced.

During Cerf's tenure, ICANN's staff and budget have grown, permitting faster response. Its roughly 100 staff members are paid out of a $41.6 million budget for fiscal 2008, compared with about a dozen employed during fiscal 2001, when ICANN budgeted $3.78 million for operating expenses.

The board and its constituency committees have reorganized numerous times in an effort to better reflect the Internet community, and minutes to private board meetings have been posted more quickly to improve transparency.

Nonetheless, many critics still complain that ICANN has neither opened the decision-making process enough nor acted as quickly as it should on issues like adding domain names — after several years, it is just now streamlining the approval process.

Few of those complaints, however, are directed at Cerf.

"It would have been a lot more without Vint," said David Farber, former chief technologist for the Federal Communications Commission. "I don't have warm, fuzzy feelings about ICANN, but Vint is not a person you want to get into battles with. He's a nice guy. He's smart. He's reasonable to talk to."

Cerf plans to disengage entirely from ICANN for at least a year, freeing him to write books and devote more time to his Google duties.

"This is a very important test ICANN both must pass and will pass, that it can withstand a change of its senior management," Cerf said. "I have no hesitation at all turning this over to a new team."