U.S. Insists on Keeping Control of Web

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GENEVA -- A senior U.S. official rejected calls on Thursday for a U.N. body to take over control of the main computers that direct traffic on the Internet, reiterating U.S. intentions to keep its historical role as the medium's principal overseer.

"We will not agree to the U.N. taking over the management of the Internet," said Ambassador David Gross, the U.S. coordinator for international communications and information policy at the State Department. "Some countries want that. We think that's unacceptable."

Many countries, particularly developing ones, have become increasingly concerned about the U.S. control, which stems from the country's role in creating the Internet as a Pentagon project and funding much of its early development.

Gross was in Geneva for the last preparatory meeting ahead of November's U.N. World Summit on the Information Society in Tunisia.

Some negotiators from other countries said there was a growing sense that a compromise had to be reached and that no single country ought to be the ultimate authority over such a vital part of the global economy.

But Gross said that while progress was being made on a number of issues necessary for producing a finalized text for Tunis, the question of Internet governance remained contentious.

A stalemate over who should serve as the principal traffic cops for Internet routing and addressing could derail the summit, which aims to ensure a fair sharing of the Internet for the benefit of the whole world.

Some countries have been frustrated that the United States and European countries that got on the Internet first gobbled up most of the available addresses required for computers to connect, leaving developing nations with a limited supply to share.

They also want greater assurance that as they come to rely on the Internet more for governmental and other services, their plans won't get derailed by some future U.S. policy.

One proposal that countries have been discussing would wrest control of domain names from the U.S.-based Internet Corporation for Assigned Names and Numbers, or ICANN.
Corporation for Assigned Names and Numbers, or ICANN, and place it with an intergovernmental group, possibly under the United Nations.

Gross dismissed it as unacceptable.

"We've been very, very clear throughout the process that there are certain things we can agree to and certain things we can't agree to," Gross told reporters at U.N. offices in Geneva. "It's not a negotiating issue. This is a matter of national policy."

He said the United States was "deeply disappointed" with the European Union's proposal Wednesday advocating a "new cooperation model," which would involve governments in questions of naming, numbering and addressing on the Internet.

In 1998, the U.S. Commerce Department selected ICANN to oversees the Internet's master directories, which tell Web browsers and e-mail programs how to direct traffic. Internet users around the world interact with them everyday, likely without knowing it.

Although ICANN is a private organization with international board members, Commerce ultimately retains veto power. Policy decisions could at a stroke make all Web sites ending in a specific suffix essentially unreachable. Other decisions could affect the availability of domain names in non-English characters or ones dedicated to special interests such as pornography.