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Africa demands rights to '.africa' Internet suffix

COTONOU (IPS)—African Internet professionals and users alike are loudly decrying attempts by a multinational corporation to obtain rights to the Internet top-level domain name (TLD) ".africa".

Rathbawn Computers, Ltd., with branches both in the United States and Australia, may soon receive permission from the Internet Corporation for Assigned Names and Numbers (ICANN) to operate the ".Africa" TLD.

At their annual meeting held in Marina del Rey, Calif., ICANN will rule on 47 applications to operate new TLDs, including that of Rathbawn. Only 10 new top level domains out of the 47 applied will be approved.

The application cost to operate a new TLD is \$50,000. Such a sum may seem a fortune for certain companies in the developing world, especially those in Africa.

ICANN is an international non-profit organization formed in 1998 to manage and monitor the Internet's technical operations, which previously had been controlled by the United States government.

ICANN has assumed responsibility for coordinating the domain name system (DNS), assigning Internet protocol (IP) addresses, determining protocol parameters, and managing the root server system.

As such, it is the sole organization authorized to accredit individuals, countries, and companies all over the world who wish to operate or sponsor TLDs or sell domain name addresses.

The seven currently existing top level domain names are ".com", ".net", ".org", ".gov", ".mil", ".int", and ".edu".

There are also 243 domain name country codes, such as ".us" for the United States or ".bj" for Benin.

The ".africa" TLD issue has stirred great controversy among African Internet users.

"The question is whether someone not from a particular country should allowed to be the operator of that country's domain name. For example, should an African be allowed to own ".fr", France's domain name?" asked Pierre Dandjinou, the African coordinator of the UN's Sustainable Development Networking Program (SDNP).

Makane Faye, the main regional councilor on the politics of information technology and communications for the Economic Commission for Africa has no doubts.

"It's not right to give the '.africa' TLD to a non-African. We want '.africa' to be managed by a respected African institution which will be cognizant of the Internet's special problems in Africa," declared Mr. Faye.

Some observers say that appropriation of the ".africa" suffix by a multinational corporation is nothing less than a financial question. It will have economic consequences for Africans who want to use this TLD for their web address.

The rights to domain names accredited by ICANN can be a great financial venture. For example, a web address ending with the domain name ".com", costs \$70 dollars every two years.

Mr. Faye states that Africa is going to mobilize to prevent awarding of the ".africa" suffix to a non-African firm. According to him, Internet professionals from Africa planned to protest at ICANN's annual meeting.

Faye indicated that they might even go to the World Intellectual Property Organization (WIPO) to let them decide if the TLD can be awarded to a non-African firm. WIPO has been willing to hear cases regarding the protection of domain names since the beginning of this year.

"WIPO can strip the company of its TLD if the arguments we present are sound," Mr. Faye explained. "We want everything that rightfully belongs to us and we want to operate it ourselves," he added.

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