

# Nations Chafe at U.S. Influence Over the Internet

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**PARIS, Dec. 7**— Paul Twomey, the president of the Internet's semi-official governing body, Iann, learned Friday night what it feels like to be an outsider.

Mr. Twomey, who had flown 20 hours from Vietnam to Geneva to observe a preparatory meeting for this week's United Nations' conference on Internet issues, ended up being escorted from the meeting room by guards. The officials running the meeting had suddenly decided to exclude outside observers.

Mr. Twomey's ejection may underscore the resentment of many members of the international community over the way the Internet is run and over United States ownership of many important Internet resources. Although Mr. Twomey is Australian, Iann -- the Internet Corporation for Assigned Names and Numbers -- is a powerful nonprofit group established by the United States government in 1998 to oversee various technical coordination issues for the global network.

Iann and the United States government are expected to come under heavy fire at the conference, which begins Wednesday in Geneva and will be one of the largest gatherings of high-level government officials, business leaders and nonprofit organizations to discuss the Internet's

future. An important point of debate will be whether the Internet should be overseen by the United Nations instead of American groups like Icann.

"I am not amused," Mr. Twomey said via a cellphone outside the conference room Friday evening after he was barred from the planning meeting. "At Icann, anybody can attend meetings, appeal decisions or go to ombudsmen. And here I am outside a U.N. meeting room where diplomats -- most of whom know little about the technical aspects -- are deciding in a closed forum how 750 million people should reach the Internet." Mr. Twomey said that others were also kept out, including members of the news media and anyone who was not a government official.

Although more than 60 nations will be represented in Geneva by their leaders, only a handful of industrial nations are sending theirs. President Bush will not attend, although other United States officials are scheduled to participate.

During the conference, an expected 5,000 representatives from intragovernmental, business and nonprofit organizations, will try to create an action plan for the next phase of the Internet. They are set to tackle thorny questions like how to close the so-called digital divide separating the rich and the poor; how to supervise the Internet; and how to deal with issues like spam and pornography on the Web.

Because the Internet first took root in the United States, it may be understandable that American interests have tended to prevail. The Massachusetts Institute of Technology, for example, still has more Internet addresses than all of China, according to Lee McKnight, an associate professor at Syracuse University and an M.I.T. research affiliate.

By 2007, though, more than 50 percent of Web users will be Chinese, according to some forecasts.

**"The world should be grateful to Uncle Sam for creating the Internet," said Talal Abu-Ghazaleh, a Jordanian businessman who is vice chairman of the United Nations' Information and Communication Technology Task Force. But, he said, it is time for the rest of the world to have a larger voice in Internet governance.**

To that end, all countries participating in the conference agreed early Sunday that a working group should be formed under the auspices of the United Nations to examine Internet governance, including whether more formal oversight of Ican by governments or intragovernmental agencies is necessary, said Markus Kummer, the Swiss Foreign Ministry's Internet envoy and the leader of the conference's working group on Internet governance.

**Mr. Abu-Ghazaleh, who is also chairman of an important International Chamber of Commerce committee, said he planned to present a proposal for a new, more international management of Ican at a**

**private meeting Tuesday. That meeting is to include leaders from six African, five Middle Eastern, four European and two Asian countries as well as Kofi Annan, the United Nations Secretary General, and Erkki Liikanen, the European commissioner charged with overseeing information technology issues.**

Conspicuously absent from the invitation list are representatives of Ican and the United States government. But some well-known Internet figures, including Nicholas Negroponte, Esther Dyson and Tim Berners-Lee, are expected to attend the meeting Tuesday. So are senior executives from a variety of multinational companies, including America Online, Microsoft, Boeing, Siemens, Alcatel and Vodafone.

At the heart of the discussions will be what role government and intragovernmental agencies should play.

"The U.S. government position is that the Internet is coordinated and led by the private sector and should be private sector led," a State Department spokesman said last week. "But we are committed to assuring that Ican remains balanced amongst all stakeholders."

**Mr. Abu-Ghazaleh, though, said he planned to propose that Ican be placed under the umbrella of a United Nations communications task force that gives equal**

**status to government, private sector and nongovernmental organizations.**

**Under his plan, the United States would have permanent presidency of an I cann oversight committee. Other permanent members would include the International Telecommunication Union, a United Nations agency; the United Nations Conference on Trade and Development; the World Intellectual Property Organization; and the International Chamber of Commerce. Each continent would have one representative on the committee, elected by the countries from the continent they represent.**

**Under the Abu-Ghazaleh proposal, I cann would continue to be based in the United States and governed by United States law, and the same people who do the technical work would continue in that role.**

Icann's Mr. Twomey said he saw no reason to change the current set-up, pointing out that nearly 100 governments are already represented on Icann's advisory committee. He said Icann planned to open regional offices in Europe, Africa, Latin America and Asia in 2004.

Icann's role is limited to technical matters like the format of Internet addresses, Mr. Twomey said. "If governments think they can really find a place to discuss spam and child porn and e-commerce, we would probably welcome it," he said. "These things are not in our charter -- it is not what we do. So we

want to assure everyone involved that we are not standing in the way."

But, he said, when it comes to the technical underpinnings of the Internet, Iann should be allowed to continue its work, Mr. Twomey said. "It is not broken, so why fix it?"