

Integrity of Internet is crux of global conference

By Eric Pfanner, New York Times

PARIS – A commercial and ideological clash is set for next week, when representatives of more than 190 governments, along with telecommunications companies and Internet groups, gather in Dubai for a once-in-a-generation meeting.

The stated purpose of the World Conference on International Telecommunications is to update a global treaty on technical standards needed to, say, connect a telephone call from Tokyo to Timbuktu. The previous conference took place in 1988, when the Internet was in its infancy and telecommunications remained a highly regulated, mostly analog-technology business.

Now the Internet is the backbone for worldwide communications and commerce. Critics of the International Telecommunication Union, the agency of the United Nations that is organizing the meeting, see a dark agenda in the meeting. The blogosphere has been raging over supposed plans led by Russia to snatch control of the Internet and hand it to the U.N. agency.

That seems unlikely. Any such move would require an international consensus, and opposition is widespread.

Terry D. Kramer, the former Vodafone executive who is the United States ambassador to the conference, has vowed to veto any change in how the Internet is overseen.

Analysts say the real business of the conference is business. "The far bigger issue – largely obscured by this discussion – are proposals that are more likely to succeed that envision changing the way we pay for Internet services," Michael Geist, an Internet law professor at the University of Ottawa, said by

email.

Hamadoun Touré, secretary general of the I.T.U., has repeatedly said that the U.N. group has no desire to take over the Internet or to stifle its growth. On the contrary, he says, one of the main objectives of the conference is to spread Internet access to more of the four and a half billion people around the world who still do not use it.

And yet, groups as diverse as Google, the Internet Society, the International Trade Union Confederation and Greenpeace warn that the discussions could set a bad precedent, encouraging governments to step up censorship or take other actions that would threaten the integrity of the Internet.

“This is a very important moment in the history of the Internet, because this conference may introduce practices that are inimical to its continued growth and openness,” Vinton G. Cerf, vice president and chief Internet evangelist at Google, said in a conference call.

Google set up a Web site last week, “Take Action,” encouraging visitors to sign a petition for a “free and open Internet.” The campaign is modeled on the successful drive last winter to defeat legislative proposals to crack down on Internet piracy in the United States.

More energy is expected to be spent on how companies make money off the Internet. In one submission to the conference, the European Telecommunications Network Operators' Association, a lobbying group based in Brussels that represents companies like France Télécom, Deutsche Telekom and Telecom Italia, proposed that network operators be permitted to assess charges for content providers like Internet video companies that use a lot of bandwidth.

Analysts say the proposal is an acknowledgment by European telecommunications companies that they cannot hope to provide digital content. “The telecoms realize that they have lost the

battle,” said Paul Budde, an independent telecommunications analyst in Australia. “They are saying, ‘We can’t beat the Googles and the Facebooks, so let’s try to charge them.’ ”

The European lobbying group says that without the new fees, there will be no money to invest in network upgrades needed to deal with a surge in traffic. Regulators have required European telecommunications operators to open their networks to rivals, and the market for broadband is fiercely competitive, with rock-bottom prices.

In the United States, by contrast, most telecommunications companies have been permitted to maintain local monopolies – or duopolies, with cable companies – in broadband, keeping prices higher. And American regulators have ordered broadband providers to give equal priority to all Internet traffic. Such “network neutrality” is incompatible with charging content providers for moving their bits of data.

Analysts say this may explain why American telecommunications companies have not joined the European call for a new business model. “Models that try to force payment terms between nations and telecom operators run a huge risk of cutting off traffic,” Mr. Kramer said in an interview. “Liberalized markets are the only way to expand the success of the Internet.”

People who have been briefed on the conference submissions say that not a single European government delegation has endorsed the telecommunications operators’ proposal, and the European Parliament has passed a resolution denouncing it. Only governments, not private groups or companies, can put items on the meeting agenda.

While many documents prepared for the conference remain secret, several people who have seen submissions say there is broad support for Internet connection fees in French-speaking Africa and among Arab nations – countries in which many telecommunications companies are still owned or heavily

regulated by governments.

Much of the attention before the 12-day conference has focused on a proposal from Russia that would effectively remove control of the Internet's infrastructure from a collection of decentralized and apolitical organizations, mostly based in the United States. "Member states," Russia proposed, "shall have equal rights to manage the Internet, including in regard to the allotment, assignment and reclamation of Internet numbering, naming, addressing and identification resources."

Those functions are performed by the Internet Corporation for Assigned Names and Numbers, a private organization with an international board that operates under contract with the United States government.

The Russian proposal was widely interpreted as a call to legitimize domestic censorship of the Internet. Yet analysts note that governments inclined to filter the Web, like China and Iran, have not waited for consensus in an international meeting to do so.