Written by **Alex Newman** on December 15, 2012

UN Bid to Seize Internet Fails but Threat Remains

Activists worldwide were celebrating after a United Nations conference, which was seeking to hand control over the Internet to an obscure UN agency known as the International Telecommunication Union (ITU) and its mostly dictatorial member regimes, ended in failure when a coalition of Western governments refused to back the schemes. However, analysts are warning that serious threats to the free and open Internet by the UN and a broad alliance of its authoritarian members are far from over.

Before and during the summit in Dubai, dubbed the World Conference on International Telecommunications (WCIT), forces hoping to impose a global UN-led regulatory regime over the World Wide Web had expressed cautious optimism. ITU Secretary General Hamadoun Touré, for example, said he expected the gathering of almost 200 governments and dictatorships to produce so-called "light-touch" Internet regulation with an increased role for the UN agency he leads and its member states.

Among the most controversial proposals discussed at the summit was the creation of a so-called Internet "kill switch" that opponents said would be used to censor content and destroy free speech. Also being sought by the ITU and some of its tyrannical members were a global surveillance regime, online taxes and fees, regulation of social media, an end to Internet anonymity, putting the Web under UN jurisdiction, handing oppressive regimes the power to shut down the Internet, and much more.

A global uproar against the UN scheming led by organizations, activists, companies, and some Western policymakers, however, killed those dreams of Internet regulation — for now at least. The ITU responded by waging a massive, taxpayer-funded propaganda blitz to counter the international outrage. By the end of the summit, though, opposition to the ITU and its member regimes' plot to gradually take over the Web reached a boiling point — especially after the UN's "public relations" schemes were leaked.

"It's with a heavy heart and a sense of missed opportunities that the U.S. must communicate that it's not able to sign the agreement in the current form," the Obama administration's ambassador to the UN summit, Terry Kramer, told delegates, citing threats to free speech and the plan to hand jurisdiction over the Internet to the ITU rather than leaving it with the private-sector organizations that currently control its architecture. "The internet has given the world unimaginable economic and social benefit during these past 24 years. All without UN regulation. We cannot support a treaty that is not supportive of the multi-stakeholder model of Internet governance."

The delegation from the government of the United Kingdom, meanwhile, expressed its opposition to the scheme in unusually strong language. "My delegation came to work for revised international telecommunication regulations, but not at any cost," explained Simon Towler, chief of the U.K. delegation. "We prefer no resolution on the internet at all, and I'm extremely concerned that the language just adopted opens the possibility of internet and content issues."

Most "nations" — the deceptive ITU and establishment-media term refers to UN-recognized

governments and despots ruling over particular territories, not actual nations — did sign the final draft of the WCIT agreement. In fact, a coalition of autocratic regimes that already censor the Web, ranging from the brutal communist dictatorship ruling over mainland China to the Islamist despots ruling much of the Middle East, were fervent supporters of the "treaty." The broad powers it would have purported to grant the UN and its member regimes also found deep backing among tyrants of all varieties.

Without the West, however, their agreement among themselves is largely meaningless, at least for now. Facing massive pressure from citizens, with countless activists worldwide now calling to abolish the ITU altogether, national governments from Canada and Australia to Western Europe joined the Obama administration in refusing to hop on board the UN Internet plot. A handful of African and Latin American governments also refused to sign the agreement thus far. In all, more than 50 ITU members did not join the regime.

In the United States, opposition to the ITU schemes was by far the most pronounced. Companies such as Google waged a massive campaign to stop the threat. Despite advancing its own unconstitutional schemes to regulate and monitor Internet activity in recent years, the U.S. Congress even unanimously approved a resolution opposing UN efforts to acquire increased control over the Web in a rare show of bipartisanship.

However, even with the apparent victory for Internet freedom advocates, a wide array of analysts and experts are warning that the danger remains. Consider the final ITU document, approved by almost 90 UN member regimes and posted online Friday, which claims that "all governments should have an equal role and responsibility for international internet governance."

The agreement also calls on governments to tackle e-mail spam — a reference that critics said was just an excuse to legitimize governments' efforts to stifle free speech. Most "nations" at the WCIT also voted for a proposal calling on the UN to "continue to take the necessary steps for ITU to play an active and constructive role in the development of broadband and the multi-stakeholder model of the internet."

Meanwhile, governments and dictatorships that were pushing for UN control of the Internet as well as broader totalitarian powers over the Web for their own regimes showed clearly that the fight was not over yet. The Russian government, among the primary drivers of the more draconian proposals at the summit, even issued veiled threats about what might happen if Western powers refused to surrender the free and open Internet.

"Maybe in the future we could come to a fragmented Internet," said Russian ITU delegate Andrey Mukhanov, a top international official at Russia's Ministry of Telecom and Mass Communications. "That would be negative for all, and I hope our American, European colleagues come to a constructive position." The regimes ruling China and the United Arab Emirates, which hosted the summit, also expressed outrage over the failure of Western governments to approve of the ITU schemes.

Despite the fact that the UN plot was not signed by the U.S. delegation, however, experts said there was still reason to fear. "By agreeing to broaden the scope of the ITU's rules to include the Internet, encompassing its operations and content, these nations [governments that signed the deal] have radically undermined the highly successful, private sector, non-governmental, multi-stakeholder model of Internet governance," explained U.S. FCC Commissioner Robert McDowell, who has a built a reputation by standing up for online liberty. "Even though the United States refused to sign the new agreement, what happened today in Dubai could have ripple effects here at home."

According to McDowell, a Republican, consumers worldwide will ultimately pay the price for the UN

and dictators' "power grab" as engineers and entrepreneurs seek to understand "this new era of an internationally politicized Internet." If the "assault on Internet freedom" continues to march forward, meanwhile, prices will rise, investment will drop, and innovation will stall, he added.

"As egregious as today's action was, many of the anti-freedom proposals were turned back — but the worst is yet to come. The United States should immediately prepare for an even more treacherous ITU treaty negotiation that will take place in 2014 in [South] Korea," the FCC commissioner warned. "Those talks could expand the ITU's reach even further. Accordingly, Internet freedom's allies everywhere should more than redouble their efforts to erase the damage that was wrought today. Freedom and prosperity are at stake. Let's never be slow to respond again. Freedom's foes are patient and persistent incrementalists. They will never give up. Nor should we."

Internet experts issued similar warnings, saying that while the ITU and its dictatorial members may have failed this time around, the danger is far from vanquished. "Godzilla appears to sink back into the sea to leave a battered Tokyo in peace, but he's merely snoozing, dreaming happy dreams of future destruction," noted People For Internet Responsibility (PFIR) co-founder Lauren Weinstein in a piece published by the popular technology-oriented *Wired* magazine. "The internet Godzilla may be heading off to sleep for now. But he'll be back, along with his brethren and multitude of minions as well. And if we haven't prepared, if we haven't taken action by then — woe to us all."

The United States, of course, still holds most of the Internet cards. However, allowing the Obama administration to cooperate with international tyrant-dominated conferences such as the WCIT poses too many risks and gives a fig leaf of legitimacy to the outrageous demands of tin-pot dictators and mass-murderers posing as "countries." More than a few analysts and even top policymakers say that to kill the UN threat to online freedom once and for all, the ITU should be permanently dismantled.

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