

Internet war: Scramble for .africa domain as January deadline looms

By the end of 2012, companies should be able to set up websites with almost any address as long as they can lay a legitimate claim to the domain name. The Internet Corporation for Assigned Names and Numbers (Icann), will receive applications for new names following the exhaustion of the available 4.3 billion Internet Protocol addresses. In Africa, control of the .africa domain name is at the centre of a tussle between the Africa Union Commission and outfits such as the DotConnectAfrica Organisation (DCA). MWAURA KIMANI spoke to the DCA boss on who will control .africa

What is the tussle over the .Africa domain all about?

The controversy emerged from a plan by the Africa Union Commission to make the .africa, .afrique and .afriqia, all similar name strings unavailable by including it in the list of reserved names, so as to frustrate the hopes of genuine applicants like DCA.

The AU had asked Icann to reserve the names. Such a proposal is a disingenuous attempt to afford special legislative protection to the AU to own these strings through a method of bypassing the formal application process of the Icann new generic top level domains (gTLDs).

You have openly criticised the AU leadership on this matter. What is it that you want done?

Giving the AU an upper hand in managing the domain raises conflict of interest issues as some players in this process are planning to pre-qualify organisations that will apply for .africa while they themselves have vested interests in the .africa TLD, because they floated separate .africa proposals of their own, and have also openly identified with some prospective applicants.

If the AU insists on controlling, owning and leading the process by using its political influence to gain official control of this new gTLD, then the AU should be treated as any other prospective applicant that also needs to abide by the Icann Applicants Guidebook and should not be given preferential treatment to the detriment of other applicants.

What was DCA's opposition to the "reserved names" issue that was proposed by the African Union?

the Icann new gTLD process and eliminates competition even before the application has been submitted to Icann.

In the interim, all interested observers are now waiting for Icann to provide a ruling on whether .africa and related name strings should be reserved or not. This will be a big decision and will shape the direction the new gTLD programme will take regarding .africa.

What were the resolutions from latest Icann meeting in Dakar last month on new TLDs and how are they likely to shape the adoption of the new regime?

The new gTLD programme was approved in the Singapore meeting earlier so there are no major resolutions that will hinder the momentum of the process. But there are some resolutions with big implications for Africa in particular such as the resolution to adopt the Joint Applicant Support Working Group (JAS WG) report on how Icann can assist applicants from the developing countries increase their participation in the new gTLD.

This could see more new gTLD initiatives emerging from Africa in this round. The other issue was the passing of the \$900,000 budget for Icann's communication plan and the resolution by the board on ethics and conflicts of interest which will give a statement on how Icann directors with interest in particular new gTLD initiatives can be restricted from participation in the deliberations and decision making on the new gTLDs program.

What remains to be done now be-



JANUARY WILL USHER IN NEW DOMAIN NAMES

In January 2012, companies, organisations, causes, start-ups and even cities will be able to apply for their own web domain. This represents a fundamental change to the way we use the Internet and many feel this will offer new global branding and marketing opportunities.

Icann sees hundreds of new extensions in the first round of applications. The overall range of Internet addresses on offer would

applications will be accepted and evaluated: a concept known as "batching."

The importance of the batching process will be determined by the number of applications received. If there are several hundred, or even thousands, they cannot all be considered at once. At a meeting in Paris three years ago, its board recommended going ahead. Since then, however, final authorisation has been delayed several times,