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U.N. says not enough governments are online

By Mark Stevenson
 THE ASSOCIATED PRESS

MEXICO CITY — Most of the world's nations have their own Web sites, but only 20 percent of people with Internet access use them, according to a U.N. report released Tuesday.

A total of 173 of the U.N.'s 191 members had Web sites in 2003, according to the U.N. World Report on the Public Sector, entitled "E-Government at the Crossroads." Just two years ago, 143 nations had Web sites.

Only 18 countries, many in Africa, remain completely off-line.

In many countries, women and the poor have less access to the Internet than other sectors. "Security and privacy issues" also discourage use among all populations, the report noted.

The Internet has more potential for governments than simply being a place for citizens to easily access basic information and forms.

"Many governments turn to Internet-based services as a way to cut red tape," said Jose Antonio Ocampo, the U.N. undersecretary-general for economic and social affairs. "But we also see the Internet as a means of advancing and consolidating transparency and

democracy."

While Web-based access can link citizens to everything from schools to hospitals and libraries, only a few government sites encourage users to help make policy, the report said.

"Only a very few governments have opted to use e-government applications for transactional services or networking, and even fewer use it to support genuine participation of citizens in politics," it said.

The United States led the rankings of e-government "readiness," or the amount of information, services and products offered over the Internet combined with the infrastructure needed to access them.

Sweden ranked second, followed by Australia, Denmark, Great Britain, Canada, Norway, Switzerland, Germany and Finland.

Most Americans who use government Web sites get tourism information, do research for school or work, download government forms or get information on services.

"U.S. users perceive the availability of e-government first and foremost as an oppor-

"We... see the Internet as a means of advancing and consolidating transparency and democracy."

— Jose Antonio Ocampo
 U.N. undersecretary

tunity to get and easy access information," the report said.

In another report, the U.N. said that the government's willingness to interact and dialogue with citizens over the Internet is a key factor in the United States for the top spot.

The top 10 included New Zealand, France, the Netherlands, Ireland and several developing countries — Chile, Estonia, Philippines, Mexico and Argentina.

Estonia, for example, has a site called "Today I Decide" at which people can propose, amend, and vote on policy issues. Officials then are required to consider the proposals.

Only 15 governments in the world accept Internet comment on public policy issues, and only 33 allow government transactions, such as filing forms or paying fines, over the Internet.

At least 60 percent of all e-government projects in developing countries fail, and about half waste some taxpayer money, the report said.

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