

U.N. Body Endorses Cultural Protection; U.S. Objections Are Turned Aside

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PARIS Oct. 20 -- In a vote cast as a battle of global conformity vs. cultural diversity, delegates to a U.N. agency turned aside strong U.S. objections Thursday and overwhelmingly approved the first international treaty designed to protect movies, music and other cultural treasures from foreign competition.

The 148 to 2 vote at the U.N. Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization emerged as a referendum on the world's love-hate relationship with Hollywood, Big Macs and Coca-Cola.

"The American delegate doesn't like to hear the word 'protection,' " Joseph Yai Olabiyi Babalola, clad in the ornate gold robes of his tiny country, Benin, told UNESCO delegates. "Not all countries are equal -- some need to be protected."

U.S. officials say the measure could be used to unfairly obstruct the flow of ideas, goods and services across borders. Films and music are among the United States' largest exports -- the foreign box-office take for American movies was \$16 billion in 2004. Assuring access to overseas markets for these products has been a prime U.S. goal at the World Trade Organization.

Louise Oliver, U.S. ambassador to UNESCO, told delegates at the organization's headquarters near the Eiffel Tower that the measure was "too flawed, too prone to abuse for us to support." She contended that dictators could potentially use it to control what their citizens read.

The measure passed at a time of growing fear in many countries that the world's increasing economic interdependence, known as globalization, is bringing a surge of foreign products across their borders that could wipe out local cultural heritage. France, for instance, has long kept measures in place to protect its film industry against imports, notably Hollywood productions.

Called the Convention on the Protection and Promotion of Diversity of Cultural Expressions, the document approved Thursday declares the rights of countries to "maintain, adopt and implement policies and measures that they deem appropriate for the protection and promotion of the diversity of cultural expressions on their territory."

Cultural expressions are defined as including music, art, language and ideas as well as "cultural activities, goods and services."

The convention would go into effect if 30 countries ratify it, a step that U.S. officials say is inevitable.

What its practical effect would be remains unclear. But proponents and dissenting U.S. officials agree that it would at least allow countries to require that imported movies have subtitles or dubbing in native languages.

Advocates say it could help small nations promote and distribute their cultural products on the world market.

Supporters included some of America's closest allies, such as Canada and Britain. British delegate Timothy Craddock called the document "clear, carefully balanced and consistent with the principles of international law and fundamental human rights."

In the vote, only Israel sided with the United States. Four countries abstained.

The showdown came two years after the United States rejoined UNESCO following a two-decade boycott that began over objections to the organization's media policy. Many American officials said UNESCO was inherently anti-American.

"Everyone would love to make this into some big U.S.-against-the-world routine," U.S. delegate Oliver said in an interview, insisting that the vote was not a sign of anti-Americanism. "It's the U.S. standing for principles, the U.S. standing for freedom, the U.S. saying things that should be said."

She and other U.S. officials have not suggested that the United States might withdraw from UNESCO again over this issue.

The vote came less than a month after delegates at a U.N.-organized summit in Geneva sided against the United States to try to remove technical control of the Internet from U.S. hands. Talks deadlocked after the European Union refused to support the United States, in a move that stunned American officials.

"In the battles over issues critical to shaping the globe in the 21st century," French sociologist Eric Fassin said, "each side is defending its own best interests." Most of the world, he said, is asking: "Is there only one way to look at things?"

Proponents are uncertain how the convention would be enforced or how potential conflicts with the free-trade rules of the World Trade Organization would be resolved. The convention states that it is not intended to overrule existing treaties but would have equal force with future ones.