The total number of registered internet addresses reached a new summit of 63 million after a record increase of 4.7 million in the first quarter, the main internet registrar said. VeriSign, which owns the domain registrar Network Solutions, said the surge in registrations reflects interest in the newer extensions like dot-biz, dot-info and dot-museum.

The overall number of 63 million is roughly one for every 100 people living in the world today.

"This number is greater than at any time in the internet's history, surpassing even the heights that were seen during the internet 'bubble.'" VeriSign said.

"Moreover, data reveal that the current base of domain names is being utilised more actively than ever before, as measured by renewal rates, look-up rates, and the percentage of domain names tied to live sites."

The spike in demand is at least partly driven by the recent availability of Arabic, Chinese and Russian characters within domain names, VeriSign officials said.

More than 72 per cent of the domain names are part of a live website, up from 55 per cent at the height of the boom in December 2002, the firm said.

This indicates "that the speculative purchase of domain names that fueled much of the growth in the late nineties has been replaced by real websites and email boxes, to which real people are connecting".

"Though North America has the highest number of internet users as a percentage of its population - some 55 per cent - increasing internet traffic is a reflection of a fast growing group of internet users around the world," said Rusty Lewis, executive vice president of VeriSign's Naming and Directory Services.

"For instance, 223 million people in Asia and 173 million people in Europe currently use the internet on a regular basis, compared with around 175 million in North America. But, those internet users represent only six per cent and 22 per cent, respectively, of the total populations of Asia and Europe."

*Agence France-Presse*

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