U.N. takes aim at spam epidemic
GENEVA, Switzerland (AP)

The United Nations is aiming to bring a "modern day epidemic" of junk e-mail under control within the next two years by standardizing legislation around the world to make it easier to prosecute, a leading expert said Tuesday. "(We have) an epidemic on our hands that we need to learn how to control," Robert Horton, the acting chief of the Australian communications authority, told reporters. "International cooperation is the ultimate goal." The International Telecommunications Union is hosting a meeting on spam in Geneva this week that brings together regulators from 60 countries as well as various international organizations, including the Council of Europe and the World Trade Organization. The U.N. agency said it would put forward examples of anti-spam legislation which countries can adopt to make cross-border cooperation easier. Many states currently have no anti-spamming laws in place, making it difficult to prosecute the international phenomenon. Top priority is "pornographic material ... that may come to the attention of children," said Horton, who is running the meeting. "I think it's time we did something formally about this. We will have to come to some sort of general understanding." As much as 85 percent of all e-mail may be categorized as spam, the ITU said, compared to an estimated 35 percent just one year ago. The vast majority is generated by a few hundred people, but authorities are not able to prosecute many of them under current legislation. Spam and anti-spam protection cost computer users some $25 billion last year, according to the United Nations. Now the problem is rapidly spreading to cell phones. Nine of every 10 spam messages in Japan are now directed to mobile phones as text messages, Horton said. Spamming is also being used to perpetrate criminal acts. One technique -- known as "phishing" -- involves sending e-mails that appear to be genuine correspondence from reputable companies. Recipients are asked for their bank details to clear up a mistake and then money is bled from their accounts.