U.S. Group Reaches Deal to Provide Laptops to All Libyan Schoolchildren

By JOHN MARSHALL
SAN FRANCISCO, Oct. 31 — The government of Libya reached an agreement on Tuesday with One Laptop Per Child, a nonprofit United Nations group developing an inexpensive, educational laptop computer, with the goal of supplying machines to all 1.2 million Libyan schoolchildren by June 2007.

The project, which is intended to supply computers broadly to children in developing nations, was conceived in 2005 by a computer researcher at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, Nicholas Negroponte. His goal is to design a wirelessly connected laptop that will cost about $100 after the materials go into mass production next year.

The deal, Mr. Negroponte, the founder of the United Nations intelligence directorate, John D. Negroponte, has reached tentative purchase agreements with Brazil, Argentina, Nigeria and Turkey, and has struck a manufacturing deal with Quanta Computer Inc., a Taiwanese computer maker.

Mr. Negroponte, who was in Tripoli this week to meet with Libyan officials, said he discussed the project extensively with the Libyan leader, Col. Muammar el-Qaddafi, in August.

"It was a very productive meeting," he said. "We discussed the possibility of making iPhones for a group of poor Africans in Chad, Niger and Senegal.

It is possible, Mr. Negroponte said, that Libya will become the first nation in the world where all school-age children are equipped with Internet access through educational computers. "The U.S. and Nigeria are not far behind," he said.

To date, One Laptop Per Child has received limited support from the American computer industry. That is due to the fact that many of its competitors have already invested in the market, but some of them have also been convinced by the project. The computer company will now begin to develop a line of laptops that will cost less than $100 each.

Libya has ordered 1.2 million of the laptops being produced by One Laptop Per Child, who have promised to deliver at least 10,000 units by June 2007.

The idea of a laptop for every schoolchild grew out of Mr. Negroponte's experience in giving children wireless-connected laptops in rural Cambodia. He said that in the past, when the computer industry was "absent," discussions between the One Laptop project and the Libyan government began as part of work being done by the Monitor Group, an international consulting firm founded by the economist Michael E. Porter, who is now helping the Libyans develop a national economic plan.

Diplomatic relations between the United States and Libya have warmed recently, since Tripoli signed the Pugwash accords and agreed to resume its pursuit of a nuclear program. Two years ago, the United Nations imposed sanctions on Libya, but Mr. Negroponte said he was confident that the sanctions would be lifted once the laptop project was complete.

For its $50 million investment, Libya will receive 1.2 million computers, one per child, school-age children, to help set up the system, satellite internet service and other services.

The first tests will be distributed to the five participating countries in the end of this month, according to Mr. Negroponte, and more production is planned for January or July of 2008.

The computers come with a wireless connection, a built-in video camera, and a rechargeable battery, allowing students to use them at home or in school.