

Belgium Today

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PRESIDENT BUSH TO VISIT BRUSSELS

On January 21, the Belgian Foreign Ministry announced that the U.S. leader would hold talks with King Albert II and the Belgian Prime Minister on February 21, during his three-day visit to Belgium.

On the following day, the President will be at NATO headquarters and European Union headquarters in Brussels. The first lady and Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice are expected to accompany Bush on this European trip. As part of a broader tour of Europe and the Middle East, the Secretary of State will also be in Brussels on February 9, when she will meet with Foreign Minister Karel DeGucht.

In a recent speech delivered before the World Jewish Congress in Brussels, Prime Minister Guy Verhofstadt affirmed, "I, for one, am convinced that 2005 can—and must—be the year of renewed Atlantic dialogue. The visit to be paid to Brussels by President Bush ...is a clear signal of this, which we warmly welcome and value deeply."

COUNTRY CELEBRATES 175 YEARS OF INDEPENDENCE

In 1830, Belgium broke away from the Netherlands and established itself as an independent nation with a constitutional monarch. To mark this 175th anniversary of independence, as well as its 25th year of federalism, the country has organized a major year-long celebration. Exhibitions will abound on Belgian art, Belgian creativity and even Belgian colonialism. A mega exhibition called "Made in Belgium" will bring together 4000 objects from museums all over the world to illustrate the richness of Belgium's history and culture.

When he presented the program to the public, Prime Minister Guy Verhofstadt indicated, "We want to use the occasion to show that our country is modern and dynamic. The aim is not to wallow in nostalgia, but to look ahead to the future, focusing on youth, encounters and conviviality."

Among the activities planned are an exchange program between young people from different countries and a "junior Olympics" for school children ages eight to fifteen. The economic sector will hold a massive convention in June, intended to bring 175 brands and economic leaders together. The celebration of National Day (July 21) will be expanded to an entire weekend of festivities in 10 cities, and in Brussels will include a huge *bal populaire* and an event at the Atomium.

For more information, please go to www.175-25.be

KING ALBERT GREETES RETURNING WWII VETS



One of the highlights of Belgium's commemoration of the 60th anniversary of the Battle of the Bulge was a ceremony at the City Hall of Bastogne, where King Albert II (center) personally bestowed medals and thanked the American veterans for their valor.

CONFERENCE ON FEDERALISM

Belgium will host the Third International Conference on Federalism, from March 3 to 5, in Brussels. The meeting, which follows successful conferences in Canada (1999) and Switzerland (2002), is being jointly organized by Belgium's Federal and Regional governments. It will be one of the important events in this year's celebration of the 25th anniversary of federalism in Belgium (see article at left).

The Conference will offer a unique forum for more than six hundred participants—leading policy makers, representatives from civil society, academics, journalists, and youth—from about one hundred countries, to exchange ideas and experiences about federalism. One question will be at the center of the discussions: how can federalism, in its various expressions, contribute to good governance and economic welfare, peace and democracy, as well as respect for identity in the context of globalization? Special attention will also be given to the contribution of federalism to conflict prevention and nation-building.

The United States, one of the largest and oldest federal countries in the world, will be represented by experts from Congress, the Administration, the judiciary, universities and the press. The American experience with federalism is extremely valuable to whoever is concerned with the workings of federal political systems.

Managing cultural diversity is one of the central challenges of our time. Struggles over cultural identity can quickly become a source

(continued on page 3)

BELGIUM CONTRIBUTES \$88.5 MILLION TO TSUNAMI EMERGENCY RELIEF

Belgium's response to the Tsunami disaster was swift and robust, as both governmental agencies at all levels and civil society mobilized funds and manpower to respond to the crisis.

Belgium's public emergency relief aid breaks down as follows :

—The Belgian Government immediately put \$680,000 at the disposal of the victims, via the Red Cross.

—An additional \$200,000 was given to the United Nations Food and Agriculture Organization for urgent food aid needed in the countries of South and South-East Asia that were hit by the tidal wave (including \$120,000 for the fishing sector, which was particularly affected).

—Belgium was the first country to send airplanes to the disaster-stricken region : the Belgian Government speedily freighted two Belgian Air Force Airbus planes with 11 tons of aid supplies for UNICEF and 11 tons for Doctors Without Borders to Colombo, Sri Lanka, as well as 70 cubic meters of humanitarian equipment for Doctors Without Borders to Medan, Sumatra, on December 28 and 29. A third Airbus mission left January 2 for Colombo with 70 cubic meters of relief material from the Government of Luxembourg.

—On December 29, a Belgian Police team specialized in Disaster Victim Identification left for Thailand. 22 Belgian agents are now integrated into a team of 300 specialists coming from 19 countries, and based in Phuket.

—On January 10, B-Fast, the emergency intervention system, dispatched equipment to build a camp of 500 tents for 2,000 refugees, to include electrical generating equipment as well as a water purification station. The team of volunteers also brought 2 trucks, to be donated afterwards to the local authorities.

—Two relief missions were undertaken by the Belgian Defense Ministry, for reconstruction activities and medical aid in Sri Lanka and Sumatra.

Like all EU member states, Belgium participates both nationally and through its contribution to the Commission's relief budget. The combined efforts and pledges by the Commission and the member states have topped \$3.5 billion.

Early on, Belgium called for the special January 7 European meeting, to strengthen the coordination of the emergency relief actions by the EU member-states and the EU Commission, and to set up a reconstruction/rehabilitation program for the region hit by the disaster in partnership with the stricken countries and the Association of Southeast Asian Nations. Belgium announced there that it would donate 15 million euros (\$19.75 million) to the reconstruction aid phase.

Meanwhile, the Belgian population was responding generously to the fund raising efforts that had been launched by the NGOs and would intensify through a huge TV fundraising operation. Altogether, 38 million euros (\$49.5 million) were collected!

NOTE TO READERS: At press time, six Belgians are known to have died in the tsunami and five others are still missing.

A DEATH IN THE ROYAL FAMILY

It is with much sadness that we report that HRH Grand Duchesse Josephine-Charlotte, sister of King Albert II and of the late King Baudouin and mother of the reigning Grand Duke of Luxembourg, died on January 10. She was 77 and had been suffering from lung cancer.

E-GOVERNMENT TAKES OFF

Belgium was ranked 16th in the United Nations' *Global E-Government Readiness Index 2004*, seven places up from the year before, showing the most improvement of all 191 countries listed in the survey. The index analyzes the efforts made by governments to provide services for its citizens electronically, and examines the extent of citizen access to those services. The U.S. tops the list, followed by Denmark and the UK.

For many years the Belgian Government has used electronic data-processing as an internal working tool, but only in the past few years has it applied computer technology to personalized services for citizens.

Belgium is one of the few countries in the world that has a centralized electronic databank that includes data on all of its citizens — those living within and outside the country. This National Register is an important system to safe-guard the identify of Belgians and it also functions as a key instrument for all government services.

With their new electronic identity card (e-ID), which includes a digital contact-chip, Belgians are now able to access government services through their home computers. The card, which is the size of a credit card, contains an electronic signature and can be activated by a personal pin-code.

This card allows Belgians to print out official certificates at home, make their income-tax declaration online, and send registered mail electronically. They can even check, directly from their homes, whether their personal files have been accessed by governmental officials.

Microsoft seems interested in the Belgian e-ID. On February 1 Bill Gates announced in Brussels that the company plans to integrate the Belgian technology into the MSN Messenger chat program. The Microsoft CEO called use of the e-ID "an historic step towards a safer internet."

Belgium is clearly a front runner in another e-government service. Last fall it became the first country in the world to issue passports with a digital chip containing personal data. In tests carried out at the Baltimore-Washington International Airport, in which nineteen countries participated, the Belgian passport proved to be a winner.

Every Belgian who has renewed a passport since January 1 has obtained this state-of-the-art travel document. Belgium's Foreign Ministry, an active promoter of e-government consular services, is now working to decrease significantly the time it takes to issue passports from the current six weeks to no longer than ten days.

MET PRESENTS FIRST MAJOR RETROSPECTIVE OF RUBENS DRAWINGS IN THE U.S.

The Metropolitan Museum of Art is hosting the first major exhibition in the United States of the drawings of Peter Paul Rubens. The show, which opened on January 15 and will run through April 3, features 115 of the Baroque master's finest and most representative drawings. Best known for his paintings, this Flemish genius is among the most imaginative of draftsmen.

At the core of the exhibition is a major unprecedented loan of 30 drawings from the Albertina, Vienna, a co-organizer of the exhibition. Among these drawings that have never before crossed the Atlantic are such celebrated works as *Nicholaas Rubens Wearing a Coral Necklace*, *Lady-in-Waiting to Infanta Isabella (Portrait of Clara Serena Rubens?)*, studies of an *Ox* and a *Saddled Horse*, and several portraits of Rubens's immediate friends and family. Because of their intimacy, and vitality and delicate execution in black, red, and white chalk, they have taken their place among the most beloved drawings in the world.

Among the dignitaries on hand at the opening of the exhibition was Belgian Ambassador to the U.S., Baron van Daele.

The exhibition is made possible by the Government of Flanders and Fortis Bank. Additional support has been provided by The Schiff Foundation and an indemnity has been granted by the Federal Council on the Arts and the Humanities.



Flemish Minister Geert Bourgeois (right) and Jacques Thys, Country Manager US of Fortis Bank, prepare to tour the Rubens exhibition.

FLEMISH MINISTER IN NEW YORK

Geert Bourgeois, Flemish Minister of Foreign Affairs, Media and Tourism, came to New York to open the Rubens exhibition. "There's no better way to put Flanders on the map than through our most famous son," he remarked.

In a whirlwind three-day program, Minister Bourgeois and his delegation met with representatives of the Clinton Foundation to explore cooperation on AIDS initiatives in southern Africa, visited Belgium's Permanent Representation at the United Nations to discuss structural reform of the U.N. and key Flemish priorities, and had a first-hand look into the digital future of televised media in the U.S. and government communications systems in New York City.

He also found time to visit the Belgian Tourist Office, where he learned that cultural tourism from the U.S. to Belgium is on the rise.

That message was reiterated to the Minister at the Ellis Island Immigration Museum. The City of Antwerp has secured cooperation from Ellis Island to set up its own emigration museum at the site of the old docks of the famous Red Star Line, which transported two million Europeans to the new world. The new museum is expected to be a tourist magnet.

CULTURAL UPDATE

According to the latest rankings by Britain's *Times Higher Education* supplement, two Belgian universities—the **Catholic University of Louvain-la-Neuve (UCL)** and the **Free University of Brussels (ULB)**—are among the best European universities. Louvain was ranked seventh and the ULB eighth in Europe.

When he received the Golden Globe for best original score for the film *The Aviator*, Howard Shore expressly thanked the **Flemish Radio Orchestra**, with whom he had recorded the music in Leuven in September 2004.

Clemson University has opened a Center at the Institut Catholique des Hautes Etudes Commerciales in Brussels, where students from public and private South Carolina colleges can study. The **Clemson University Brussels Center** also supports an important economic partnership between South Carolina and Belgium.

Construction has begun on the **Museum of Europe**, which will be situated in the European Parliament extension in Brussels. The new museum is expected to open in 2007 to mark the 50th anniversary of the Treaty of Rome.

FEDERALISM (continued from page 1)

of instability within states and between them. Due to its location at the crossroads of different cultures, Belgium has a long history of dialogue between communities. This dialogue has resulted in a unique federal system aimed at protecting the identity of three linguistic communities by offering them a very large degree of political, cultural and economic autonomy.

Certainly, a "one-size-fits-all" federal model does not exist. Each situation requires a tailor-made approach, adapted to the needs of a particular cultural, historical and demographic environment. The Conference intends to promote a better understanding of federalism and its potential in promoting peace and democracy, as well as economic and cultural welfare.

To use Prime Minister Verhofstadt's words, "Combining experience and creativity will eventually bring solutions to many existing and potential conflicts and thus foster greater tolerance. The Third International Conference on Federalism aims at contributing to this process."

EVENTS OF INTEREST

Through April 3 — New York, NY

Peter Paul Rubens (1577-1640): The Drawings, at the Metropolitan Museum of Art (see page 3). Info: 212 535-7710

February 4 — Washington, DC

Divas on the Edge, a recital celebrating the female psyche, starring sopranos Lyubov Petrova and Christine Antenbring, with Belgian Mikhail Hallak at the keyboard. Maison Française, Embassy of France. Info: 202 944-6091

February 8-May 22 — Atlanta, GA

Masterpieces from European Artist Colonies, 1830-1930 at the Oglethorpe University Museum. Info: 404 364-8555

February 13 & 16 — New York, NY

Bass-baritone Jose van Dam performs songs and arias by Fauré, Berlioz, Massenet, Delibes, and Bizet, with piano accompaniment, at Alice Tully Hall, Lincoln Center. Tickets: 212 721-6500

March 6 — New York, NY

Violinist Baiba Skride, winner of the 2001 Queen Elisabeth Competition, debuts in New York at Merkin Hall. Info: 212 501-3330

March 7 & 28 and April 4 — Washington, DC

Director Lucas Belvaux's film trilogy at the Alliance Française. 3/7 *Un Couple épatant*; 3/28 *Cavale*; 4/4 *Après la vie*
Info: 202 234-7911

March 11 — Atlanta, GA

Lecture, in English, by Jacques De Decker "Could a Strong European Spirit Prevail," at the Goethe Institute. Info: 404 875-1211

March 15 — College Park, MD

Jacques De Decker speaks on *La Francophonie* (in French with English subtitles), in Saint Mary's Hall, University of Maryland at 2:30 p.m. Reservations: 301 405-4024

March 18 — Washington, DC

The annual *Grande Fête de la Francophonie*, at the Maison Française, Embassy of France. Tickets (\$12) will be available from 2/21 to 3/11 only. Info: 202 448-6356 and www.francophoniedc.org

DIANE VON FURSTENBERG



Brussels-born fashion doyenne Diane von Furstenberg, whose signature "wrap" dress and other creations are sold in over 50 countries, spoke at the Corcoran Gallery of Art in Washington, DC, on January 24. Introduced by Corcoran director David Levy as a "protean talent," von Furstenberg shared with the audience many of the highlights of her extraordinarily successful career in designing, publishing and merchandizing. "My purpose," said the designer of clothes sought and worn by celebrities worldwide, "has always been to give women confidence." The talk was followed by a reception in her honor hosted by Ambassador van Daele at the Belgian residence.

JACQUES DE DECKER

Journalist, playwright, critic and translator Jacques De Decker will give two lectures in the U.S. in March (see "Events of Interest," left). De Decker has been a prolific literary critic for over twenty years and since 1971 has been a contributor to Belgium's largest francophone daily newspaper, *Le Soir*. For the past three years, he has been the secretary of Belgium's Royal Academy of French Language and Literature. His talk in Atlanta explores the role of the European heritage and culture in our globalized society, while at the University of Maryland he will attempt to arrive at a comprehensive definition of "francophonie."



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