

Belgium Today

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PRIME MINISTER LEADS DELEGATION

The new year began with intense diplomatic activity between the United States and Belgium. On January 17 Prime Minister Guy Verhofstadt, Deputy Prime Minister and

Minister of Finance Didier Reynders and Minister of Foreign Affairs Karel De Gucht were received by President Bush in the Oval Office. The President and the Prime Minister discussed the transatlantic relationship, cooperation between the U.S. and Belgium in Africa, the situation in Iran and the Middle East and the Belgian OSCE presidency, in a meeting that lasted twice as long as originally planned. The productive dialogue underscored the excellent relationship between the United States and Belgium and the importance of close cooperation between Europe and America in international affairs. On the same day, Foreign Minister De Gucht had a separate meeting with Secretary of State Rice to discuss the international agenda.

The meeting with President Bush kicked off a five-day U.S. visit to Washington, New York and Chicago aimed primarily at promoting American investment in Belgium. For the economic part of the mission the Belgian Ministers were joined by State Secretary Vincent Van Quickenborne, responsible for administrative reform, by a number of representatives from the private sector and by representatives of the Belgian Regions, which play an essential role in attracting and promoting investment.

In all three cities, the Prime Minister and his delegation participated in investment seminars and social events directed at the business community. Members of the delegation also had individual contacts with existing and potential investors in order to respond to company-specific requests and concerns. In Washington, the Belgian Ministers met with the President of the U.S. Chamber of Commerce and a number of its members. In New York, a similar discussion took place with the President of the New York Stock Exchange and representatives of listed corporations. One of the main goals of the economic mission was to present the recently introduced 'Notional Interest Deduction.' This innovative measure provides for a tax deduction for the cost of capital for both Belgian and foreign investors. Belgium is the only country in Europe with this notable incentive.

The visit was also an occasion for Verhofstadt to meet with Kofi Annan, Secretary-General of the United Nations. In Chicago the Prime Minister paid a visit to Mayor Daley, while the Deputy Prime Minister visited the Chicago Board of Trade. To conclude a hectic but very productive week, the Prime Minister and his delegation visited Northwestern Memorial Hospital in Chicago which uses important diagnostic instruments from Belgium.

VERHOFSTADT ADVOCATES A "UNITED STATES OF EUROPE"

On January 17, Prime Minister Guy Verhofstadt addressed approximately two hundred Administration officials, Congressional staffers, diplomats, and academics at the Center for Strategic International Studies (CSIS) in Washington, D.C. Following is an excerpt from the speech in which he outlined his vision for the unification of Europe.

"...What Europe really needs is a genuine European economic strategy. We must establish common socio-economic policies. We must work towards the convergence of rules governing fiscal and social security matters. And we must develop a common research and development strategy to make Europe far more competitive...

We need also a single European area of justice and security and we must also be capable of tackling crime, terrorism and illegal immigration. The new Europe should also have a real common foreign policy to prevent the Union from being divided, as it was over going to war in Iraq and prevent the kind of indecision that existed when there was a civil war in the former Yugoslavia, a war fought on our own continent. We are still grateful for the help provided by the USA, but as a Union we should have been ashamed. That is why in the future we must have a European army, not just on paper, but one that can actually operate in the field, including beyond our borders.

The philosophy behind all these proposals is the same. I'm convinced that citizens' doubts and uncertainty, as reflected in the referendums on the European Constitution, are actually a plea for more Europe, for a stronger Europe. The French and Dutch didn't vote against the European Constitution because they are opposed to Europe or want less Europe. They voted no because today's Europe doesn't provide the right answers to their concerns.

Consequently, I'm advocating a stronger Europe, a more closely integrated Europe. I'm advocating a powerful Europe that pursues a common economic strategy, a Europe that takes a joint stance against crime, drugs and terrorism, a Europe that speaks abroad with one voice — in short, I'm advocating a United States of Europe."

The Prime Minister's new book "The United States of Europe" is currently available in Dutch from Uitgeverij Houtekiet (www.houtekiet.com/). The French-language version will be published by Editions Luc Pire (www.lucpire.com) and the English-language version by Federal Trust (www.fedtrust.co.uk/).

BELGIUM ASSUMES OSCE PRESIDENCY

On January 1 Belgium took over the rotating Presidency of the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE). For one year, Minister of Foreign Affairs Karel De Gucht will be the Organization's Chairman-in-Office.

Belgium has set out a number of priorities for its Presidency. "Respect for the rule of law" and "good governance" are at the top of the agenda, along with activities to promote the proper functioning of criminal justice. Belgium strongly supports the Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights (ODIHR) so it can continue its valuable work related to election monitoring and long term democratization.

The Belgian Presidency wishes to strengthen the economic dimension of the OSCE, and will focus on the role transportation networks and transport development play in enhancing regional economic co-operation and stability. Special attention will be given to the opportunities that the improvement of transportation infrastructure can provide for the economic development of Central Asia and the Caucasus.

The OSCE is a unique forum for dialogue with the countries in Central Asia and the Caucasus. In both regions, the OSCE is assisting the new democracies to consolidate their institutions. It is also playing a role in the search for solutions to the lingering conflicts that mostly originate from the collapse of the Soviet Empire, and which are called the "frozen conflicts": these are the stalemates in Transnistria (Moldova), South-Ossetia and Abkhazia (Georgia), as well as the conflict between Armenia and Azerbaijan on Nagorno-Karabach. As Chairman-in-Office, Minister De Gucht intends to contribute actively to solutions to these conflicts.

Furthermore, the expertise of the OSCE will undoubtedly contribute to the stabilization and reconstruction of Kosovo, once its international status will have been decided upon.

The Presidency will also move ahead with the institutional reform of the OSCE, the road map for which was laid out under the previous (Slovenian) Presidency. This reform is aimed at making the Organization more efficient in dealing with the new challenges it has been facing since the end of the Cold War (please see sidebar at right).

OSCE BACKGROUNDER

The Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe was created in 1975 with the signing of the "Helsinki Act," a milestone in the détente between the then- Communist Bloc and the West. The "Conference on Security and Cooperation in Europe," as it was first called, was meant to be a forum for dialogue and negotiation between the East and the West.

The work of the OSCE is organized around three "baskets" or dimensions: political-military security, economic and environmental cooperation, and the promotion of the rule of law and human rights.

Thirty years later, after the fall of the Berlin Wall and the end of the Communist era, the OSCE, with its 55 members ("from Vancouver to Vladivostok") is still the largest regional security cooperation framework in the world. And although the direct threat of a war on the European continent is no longer present, the OSCE keeps its relevance as a center for dialogue between its very diverse members. In particular, it has taken up an important role in the support of the new democracies and the newly independent countries in East and Central Europe. Since the end of the Cold War, threats other than purely military —such as terrorism, cross border and organized crime, illegal migration networks, and all sorts of trafficking, including trafficking in humans — have increased.

In order to be able to face these new challenges, the OSCE is currently in the process of reforming itself. The road map for this reform was set out by the Ministerial Meeting in Ljubljana in December 2005.

Nowadays, the OSCE is probably best known for its activities in the field of election monitoring, organized by ODIHR. The reports that OSCE election observers issue on the basis of their monitoring activities are authoritative. ODIHR has many other activities which are aimed at long-term democratization, strengthening of the rule of law and promotion of human rights in the OSCE Member States.

TRENDS

Prompted by concern that antibiotics are losing their effectiveness because they are being taken for the wrong reasons, the Ministry of Health has launched an information campaign aimed at **decreasing the use of antibiotics**. The message is that antibiotics are not effective in treating viral infections, such as colds and flu. The first campaign of this nature was launched about five years ago and had positive results: the country has seen a 30% decrease in the number of prescriptions for antibiotics.

Belgians are saving more than ever. At the end of 2005 **savings accounts** showed a total of 157.8 billion euros. This figure represents a 5% increase compared to 2004.

Beginning on January 1, it has been forbidden to smoke in offices and in public spaces in Belgium. And, Health Minister Rudy Demotte announced that starting in 2007 there will be a **smoking ban in restaurants** throughout Belgium. All restaurants will be totally non-smoking, although some bars and cafés serving drinks as well as food will be able to apply for exemptions under certain conditions. It is estimated that 2,500 people die each year in Belgium from second-hand smoke.

The Belgian National Institute of Statistics reports that the **average marriage age** is rising. For the year 2003, the age climbed to 31 years and 3 months for a woman and 34 years and 2 months for a man. Over the course of a decade, this represents an increase of 3 years and 5 months for a woman and 3 years and 10 months for a man. This tendency can be explained in part by the number of remarriages. First-time bride and grooms are 26 years and 5 months and 28 years and 10 months respectively.

AMBASSADOR HOSTS MINORITY ARCHITECTS



Some twenty-five members of the Washington, DC chapter of the National Organization of Minority Architects (NOMA) visited the Ambassador's Residence one Saturday last fall to admire the work of Julian Abele, the African-American architect who designed the mansion.

On the tour were Dreck Wilson, who is writing a book on Abele, as well as one of Abele's own descendants, the architect Peter Cook. Ambassador van Daele told his guests about the history of the house, which was built for the daughter of car manufacturer Horace Dodge in 1931 and was purchased by the Belgian Government in 1945. Wilson and Cook complemented the discussion with anecdotes about Abele's life and personality.

Born in Philadelphia in 1881, Abele became the first African-American graduate of the University of Pennsylvania School of Architecture. He also studied at the Ecole des Beaux Arts in Paris and became chief designer to Philadelphia-based Horace Trumbauer, the Belgian Residence's architect of record.



Photo: Free Library of Philadelphia

Julian F. Abele

Abele became enamored of 18th century French buildings and translated this style into the more than 200 "gilded age" mansions, townhouses, office buildings, chapels, libraries, train depots, hotels collegiate buildings and mausoleums that he designed. Among his most well known buildings are the Philadelphia Museum of Art, the Philadelphia Free Library, Harvard's Widener Memorial Library and most of the original buildings on the campus of Duke University.

NATIONAL GALLERY PUBLISHES FLEMISH CATALOGUE

The National Gallery of Art in Washington, DC, has an exceptional collection of seventeenth-century Flemish paintings. At the heart of this collection are twelve paintings by Peter Paul Rubens and his school and seventeen paintings by Sir Anthony van Dyck, including some of their finest masterpieces. Thanks to Arthur K. Wheelock these works and those of other important Flemish masters are now the subject of a new catalogue: "Flemish Paintings of the Seventeenth Century."



According to Wheelock, the museum's Curator of Northern Baroque Painting, "The National Gallery has what is probably the best collection of van Dycks in the world. This is partly due to the founding benefactors, Joseph Widener and Andrew Mellon, who loved van Dyck's elegance."

Until 1980 the Flemish collection consisted only of van Dyck and of Rubens. Under Wheelock's aegis the collection has expanded to include works by ten additional artists, including David Teniers the Younger, Jan Brueghel the Elder, Adriaen Brouwer and Osias Beert the Elder.

No fewer than 36 paintings in the collection have been cleaned since Wheelock began to write the catalogue about twenty years ago. During the conservation process, he made discoveries about the works and this new information is included in his book.

Wheelock says his involvement with the collection and the catalogue has taught him "that the 17th century in Flanders was a wonderful period in art...so rich and with so much for us to learn."

For information on ordering the book, please phone 202 842-6002 or see www.nga.gov/shop/shop.htm

ANCIENT MAP DISCOVERED BY BELGIAN

The oldest known land map in the western world was discovered in Taranto, Italy, by a team under the direction of Belgian archaeologist Thierry Van Compernelle of the University of Montpellier. The map, etched onto a fragment of black earthenware, is more than 2,500 years old. It depicts the heel of boot-shaped Italy, shows wave-like markings for the Adriatic and Ionian Seas and has dots indicating thirteen villages. Early writings mentioned maps, but this is the first one that has been unearthed.

PUBLIC VOTES ON GREATEST BELGIANS

Who are the two greatest Belgians? In December French-speaking listeners of the public station RTBF voted for poet, singer and composer Jacques Brel. Earlier, in a contest sponsored by the VRT, their Dutch-speaking compatriots chose Father Damien (Damien de Veuster), the 19th century missionary priest who worked in the leper colony in Molokai, Hawaii. Some of the others who received votes were King Baudouin, cyclist Eddy Merckx, Tintin creator Hergé, painter René Magritte and writer Georges Simenon.

BELGIANS IN THE NEWS

Daniel Cardon de Lichtbuer, the co-founder of Child Focus, the European Federation for Missing and Sexually Exploited Children, has been named Chairman of the Board of the International Center for Missing and Exploited Children (ICMEC). The Alexandria, Virginia-based Center is a private, non-profit NGO which works on a global basis to combat child abduction and abuse.

Alice Hecht, a senior Belgian official who has been working at the United Nations in New York since 1974, became the organization's Chief of Protocol on January 14. Since July 2003, Hecht has headed the Division of Administration of the United Nations Interim Administration Mission in Kosovo (UNMIK), with particular responsibility for ensuring the efficiency and effectiveness of UNMIK's work, and providing policy advice.

TASTE BELGIUM IN ATLANTA

The Belgian American Chamber of Commerce, Southern Chapter will host its annual "Taste of Belgium" on March 24 at Atlanta's InterContinental Buckhead.

Guests will be able to sample Belgian beers and hors d'oeuvres at a reception. A sumptuous gastronomic dinner, highlighting Belgian spring delicacies, will be prepared by Michel Theurel, Founding Chairman of the International Executive Chefs Club, together with Executive Chef Bixente Pery of the InterContinental Buckhead.

Special guests will include Ambassador of Belgium Baron van Daele, former U.S. Ambassadors Andrew Young and Anne Cox Chambers, Consul of Belgium Jan Verbeeck, Atlanta Mayor Shirley Franklin and Brussels Mayor Freddy Thielemans.

EVENTS OF INTEREST

February 19 & 21— Washington, DC

The Kuijken String Quartet performs the complete cycle of Mozart's "Haydn" Quartets. Quartets 1, 2 & 3 will be presented at the National Gallery of Art (West Building) on Feb. 19 at 6:30 p.m. Admission, on a first-come first-served basis, is free. Info: 202 842-6941. Quartets 4, 5 & 6 will be presented at the Library of Congress (Coolidge Auditorium) on Feb. 21 at 8:00 p.m. This concert is also free, but tickets are required; they may be obtained for a small service charge through Ticketmaster: 202 397-7328

March 6 - 19 — Indian Wells, CA

Tennis stars Kim Clijsters and Justine Henin-Hardenne participate in the Pacific Life Open. Info: 800 999-1585 or www.pacificlifeopen.com

March 8— April 30 — New York, NY

Didier Mahieu "A Day Elsewhere -Think Tank 2," at the Chelsea Museum of Art. Info: 212 255-0719. On March 24, there will be an evening tasting of Belgian beers hosted by Ale Street News, the Belgian Consulate in New York and the Petite Abeille Restaurants. Tickets: www.alestreetnews.com

March 16 — New York, NY

"The Magic of Toots" —A Celebration of Toots Thielemans (jazz harmonica) at Carnegie Hall. Tickets: 212 247-7800

March 24 — Washington, DC

"Grande fête de la Francophonie," Washington's annual celebration of the French-speaking world, at the Maison Française, Embassy of France. Tickets :www.francophoniedc.org

March 24 — Atlanta, GA

Taste of Belgium (see article above) at the InterContinental Buckhead. Info: 404 815-2294

March 27 — Washington, DC

Concert by pop singer Arno, at the Maison Française, Embassy of France. Admission: \$25. Reservation required: culture@ambafrance-us.org, or 202 944-6091

March 29 — Washington, DC

Lecture "Les Intransparents" by Pierre Taminiaux, to open an exhibition of his paintings and drawings on paper, in the McCarthy Space, Georgetown University. Info: 202 687-8370

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