

MLA agreement initialled between HKSAR and Belgium

The following is a joint press release by the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region Government and the Belgian Government on the initialling of an agreement on Mutual Legal Assistance in Criminal Matters:

An agreement on Mutual Legal Assistance (MLA) in Criminal Matters between the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region (HKSAR) and Belgium was initialled today (February 18) after the successful conclusion of a second round of negotiations held in Hong Kong.

Representing the two jurisdictions at the ceremony were the Secretary for Justice, Ms Elsie Leung, and the visiting Minister of Justice of Belgium, Mr Marc Verwilghen.

Extending a warm welcome to Mr Verwilghen, Ms Leung said that the initialling of the agreement was a milestone in cooperation between the governments of the HKSAR and Belgium.

Under the agreement, the two parties could request assistance in criminal cases in areas such as taking of evidence, search and seizure, production of documentary evidence, transfer of persons to provide assistance, confiscating proceeds of crime and service of documents.

"The agreement highlights the close co-operation between the HKSAR and the Belgian Governments in combatting crime more effectively.

"Hong Kong looks forward to embarking on negotiation of agreements relating to other areas of co-operation with Belgium. Next on our agenda is negotiation of a Transfer of Sentenced Persons Agreement with the Belgian Government. We stand ready to be Belgium's partner in Asia in the fight against crime," Ms Leung said.

Mr Verwilghen expressed his satisfaction with the finalisation today of the bilateral agreement on Mutual Legal Assistance in Criminal Matters, stating that this cooperation was the first to be initiated with Hong Kong, but more Agreements were to be negotiated in the future with other partners in Asia.

"Crime is becoming global, unfortunately, and the only effective way to deal with it is to engage in a process of effective cooperation," Mr Verwilghen said.

Before the initialling ceremony, Ms Leung and Mr Verwilghen had a useful discussion on matters of mutual interest, including international legal cooperation and combatting corruption, money laundering and trafficking in drugs and human beings.

The Hong Kong negotiation team on the MLA was led by Law Officer (International Law) Mr Ian Wingfield, and the Belgian team was led by Mr Alain Bourlet, President of the Federal Public Service Justice.

So far, Hong Kong has signed 13 MLA agreements with other countries, including the UK and the USA. The numbers of signed international agreements regarding transfer of sentenced persons and surrender of fugitive offenders are seven and 13 respectively.

END/Tuesday, February 18, 2003

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