

Speech by Secretary for Justice at Belgian King's Day Reception
(English only)

Following is the speech by the Secretary for Justice, Mr Wong Yan Lung, SC, at the Belgian King's Day Reception today (November 30):

Honourable Consul General [Mr Michelle Malherbe], Ladies and Gentlemen,

On behalf of the Government of the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region, I have the honour to extend to you, Honourable Consul General and the people of Belgium our warmest congratulations on the Belgian your King's Day.

This is the second time I have celebrated the King's Day with you. I am delighted to meet so many friends again and to welcome the new Consul General and his new team.

The Hong Kong SAR Government is following developments in Belgium with interest. We understand that the King is receiving regular reports from the Politicians involved in discussions over the formation of a new Government. While progress towards a new Government is taking time, this will not have an impact on Hong Kong's relationship with Belgium, which will continue to be cordial.

As many of you will agree, Belgium and Hong Kong share a great deal in common. Occupying strategic locations, we both have built on our strengths to become regional gateways. Belgium is at the heart of Europe, hosting the headquarters of several major international organisations. Hong Kong is an international financial and commercial hub in Asia. No doubt we have made use of our inherent advantages and worked as close partners to benefit from the enormous opportunities available to us in our respective regions.

Our cordial partnership is signified by a wide array of co-operation agreements, covering air services, investment promotion and protection, mutual legal assistance, transfer of sentenced persons and customs matters. Amongst them, the most famous one is the comprehensive Avoidance of Double Taxation Agreement, which is the first of its kind between Hong Kong and a major European economy. This landmark Agreement is a powerful tool to facilitate two-way investment flows and a catalyst in deepening our bilateral relations.

Last year, Belgium was Hong Kong's 6th largest trading partner among the 25 EU Member States. Over the past five years,

our bilateral trade has seen an impressive annual growth of 10.7%. This owes in no small part to the important Double Taxation Agreement between us. In monetary terms, the value of our trade amounted to about HK\$32 billion in 2006.

Not only is Belgium an important trading partner for Hong Kong, in recent years, we have seen a blossoming of cultural exchanges between Belgium and Hong Kong. Students from the Hong Kong Academy of Performing Arts performed in Brussels in celebration of the Chinese New Year and the 10th anniversary of the establishment of the HKSAR. Belgian films have been screened in various film festivals in Hong Kong. I also note that the internationally acclaimed Belgian organist Johan Hermans will give a pipe organ concert and two lecture demonstrations in Hong Kong next month.

Our long-established links are further strengthened by the frequent high level visits between the two places. In 2005, former Belgian Prime Minister Mr Guy Verhofstadt visited Hong Kong during the month-long Best of Belgium Festival. In 2006, our Chief Executive visited Belgium. In June this year, we were privileged to receive Prince Philippe of Belgium, who led a high-level trade delegation to Hong Kong as part of his China tour.

I would also like to take this opportunity to thank the vibrant Belgian community in Hong Kong for their support to the local people. In July, the Belgium-Luxembourg Chamber of Commerce donated \$2.3 million, which were raised on the occasion of the Royal Gala dinner for Prince Philippe and Princess Matilda of Belgium, to the Community Chest. Thank you for your generosity and care for Hong Kong.

Being close partners, we know very well that Belgium is not only about quality chocolates and beer. I am confident that we will continue to strengthen our ties in the years to come.

As you celebrate your King's Day, may I sincerely wish the people of Belgium prosperity and happiness, and that the friendship between the peoples of Belgium and Hong Kong would be closer than ever.

May I now propose a toast "To the King and People of Belgium".

Ends/Friday, November 30, 2007