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Speech Verhofstadt - Jet Airways

Embargo till 14.30 pm

Speech given by Prime Minister Guy Verhofstadt for the launch of Jet Airways at Brussels Airport.

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Dear Mr Patel, Dear Mr Goyal, Excellencies, Ladies and gentlemen, To become a gateway to the world. That is the dream of every ambitious airport. And certainly for Brussels. As the airport of the capital of Europe, this ambition hardly seemed feasible. To see the great parts of the world, especially towards Asia, you first have to fly from Brussels to Frankfurt, London, Paris or Amsterdam. That will change today. Starting today, Brussels Airport and Brussels Airlines are taking a major new step forward towards making its dream come true. Thanks to Jet Airways. In early November 2006 I was on a tour of India to promote notional interest deduction. During my last stop, in Mumbai, I made two new friends. First of all the Minister for Civil Aviation, Praful Patel. Just like in Belgium, where the loss-making Sabena was replaced by the private and profitable Brussels Airlines, Mr Patel deregulated the aviation industry in India. He privatised the airports, permitting domestic airlines to operate to international destinations. This paved the way for making the Brussels Inc project possible. I met Mr Naresh Goyal not once, but several times in Mumbai. Mr Goyal is an impressive man. With over 37 years' experience in the civil aviation industry he became founder and chairman of Jet Airways, India's premier airline. He was also the first chairman of a private airline in India to be elected to the prestigious Board of Governors of the International Air Transport Association. During our lunchtime discussion about cooperation between Jet Airways and Brussels Airport, I was not only convinced that we would soon be partners, but also good friends. That is why I am proud to be able to announce today a great moment for both Jet Airways and Brussels Airport. As of today, Brussels is the European hub for Jet Airways. With this move, Brussels will become the gateway between the Americas, Europe, Asia and Africa. As of today, Jet Airways is our connection to Mumbai, Delhi, Chennai, Bangalore and Ahmedabad, on the one hand, and New York, Toronto, Chicago and Los Angeles on the other. Via India, we also have a platform for other destinations, such as Singapore, Bangkok and, in the longer run, Shanghai and Hong Kong. For its part, Brussels Airlines is the connection to a multitude of destinations in Europe and Africa. In short, with today's cooperative venture the world is linked via Brussels. More specifically, as of August there will be four return Mumbai-Brussels-New York and Delhi-Brussels-Toronto flights per day. Starting in 2008, that will rise to six flights. The ultimate goal is ten flights per day. That means 3,200 passengers per day. Or one million extra passengers per year for Zaventem. This new global network is not only attractive for tourists or businessmen, who want to waste less time. It is also a lifeline for Belgian trade. Globally, Belgium is the number three location for Indian investments. Our country is also one of India's top three European trading partners. Last year, India invested more than one billion US dollars in Belgium. Not bad. But that is going to rise. This agreement is the way towards greater mutual investment and therefore more jobs. I learned that Mr Goyal also has plans use our flight Academy in Brussels to train approximately 150 pilots. But Mr Goyal also has other creative plans. He wants to set up a travel product for transit passengers. Instead of letting them just sit around waiting in the airport, he wants to offer them a sightseeing tour of Brussels. I can only welcome these ideas. They are a great way of promoting our country. And they also create hundreds of direct and indirect new jobs. Ladies and gentlemen, The capital of Europe will become a major European hub. This is a dream come true.

Cooperation between Jet Airways, Brussels Airways and Brussels Airport is a major new impetus for our economy and employment. It offers us a new window on the world. To all Indians, Americans and Canadians, I would like to say "Welcome to Belgium!" And to all Belgians, I would like to say "Go to India!" It is a fantastic and intriguing country. Take it from me. I've been there and I will definitely be going back. Thank you.