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Speech by Prime Minister The World Jewish Congress

Speech by Prime Minister Guy Verhofstadt delivered to the World Jewish Congress

Brussels, 10 January 2005

!!! EMBARGO TILL 18H00 !!!

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Ladies and Gentlemen, 2004 was not a very uplifting year. We all witnessed escalating violence: the hostage-taking of innocent and defenceless schoolchildren in Beslan, incessant bloody attacks and hostage-taking in Iraq, the disgraceful unacceptable practices to which the Sudanese people were subjected. Continuing violence also prevented any decisive step forward being taken towards Israeli-Palestinian reconciliation. Closer to home, in Antwerp students attending a Jewish school were attacked. And of course the killing of Dutch film-maker Theo Van Gogh made waves far beyond the Netherlands. Yet the biggest tragedy last year was caused not by Man, but by nature. None of us can forget the images of the devastating power of the tsunami in Southeast Asia. The statistics, with over 150,000 dead and many more injured, make it one of the worst natural catastrophes and most terrible human calamities in history. Nonetheless, I would like to highlight two sources of hope that emerge from this immense tragedy. Firstly, it is surely heart-warming that so many people all over the world should still feel affected by what Levinas referred to as 'the face of the Other'. The whole world over, people are spontaneously taking responsibility, organising aid and generating solidarity. Happily then, the frequently heard claims by pessimists that 'virtually everyone is selfish nowadays' don't stand up to examination. Secondly, it is encouraging to see so many governments now sitting down together around the same table to coordinate the joint aid effort that is so desperately needed. This is a hopeful sign for the future, especially for the international community and the United Nations. Indeed, the last few days have proven the strength and usefulness of their specialised organisations. Another catastrophe brought the nations of the world closer together just a few years ago when the Greek government was the first to offer help after an earthquake ravaged Turkey. Because whereas Turkey was - until recently - an arch rival of Greece, in the meantime it has gained the acceptance of the European Union and hence also of Greece as a candidate EU Member State. We will certainly need these promising modes of cooperation more than ever in 2005. For the coming year will provide both huge challenges and tremendous opportunities. These opportunities have to be exploited. For instance with respect to the coexistence of different faiths and religions. Whereas people used to be condemned on the basis of their nationality, today they are increasingly being singled out for their religious loyalties and convictions. This brings to mind the very worst episodes in human history. So we must make every effort to curb such negative trends. Building on the successful meeting between rabbis and imams held a few days ago in Brussels, it was with this in mind that I recently announced the launch this year in Belgium of a wide-ranging inter-religious dialogue. 2005 will be a crucial year for international politics. Not merely because progress will definitely have to be made in solving conflicts that have been dragging on for far too long already, like those in Central Africa or Kosovo. Above all, 2005 must serve as a window of opportunity, especially with regard to the Middle East. Yesterday, the Palestinian people elected a new President. I hope this will mark a fresh start by the Palestinian authorities, a step down the road leading to a definitive peaceful settlement, a watershed that triggers new investment and prompts support from the international community. Meanwhile, the Israeli government will be extended to include the Labour Party, thereby giving it very wide-ranging support from the Israeli people. A majority of Israelis supports the withdrawal from the Gaza Strip, an evacuation that we regard as a first, hopeful step towards the further implementation of the existing roadmap. Moreover, elections are due to be held in Iraq

within the next few weeks. We hope they will be successful and enable the Iraqi people to take their future in their own hands. In any event, these new developments offer a unique opportunity to attain peace and stability in that region of the world. Now it is up to all of us to seize this unique opportunity together, and by "us" I mean not just the parties involved, but above all Europe and the United States. Both Europe and the United States are well aware of where their responsibility lies and know they have a major role to play in the establishment of international stability. What we share is the same concern. Don't we both want Israel to be a safe country in which to live? Don't we both share the Palestinian people's wish to see a fully-fledged Palestinian state? Don't we both want to see the people of Iraq enjoy a life of freedom and security? Don't we both want Iran to desist from its military nuclear programme? This shared vision and concern should not come as a surprise to anybody, for Europe and the United States share the same values. We both believe in freedom, in stability and in peace. And it is precisely because we are striving to attain the same goals that both of us, on each side of the Atlantic, regretted our recent disagreements over the approach to be taken and the resources to be deployed. After all, such international discord merely led to instability and uncertainty, and all the more so because it sometimes seemed like a fundamental rift. Henry Kissinger called 1974 the 'Year of Europe'. Countries on both sides of the Atlantic Ocean were still suffering from the oil shock. In Europe we were even so deeply concerned that European foreign ministers convened an informal emergency meeting at a castle in Gymnich, Germany. And the place name Gymnich has stuck to the name of the informal weekend gathering of Europe's foreign ministers held twice a year ever since. What we need today, thirty years on, is what I would call 'an Atlantic Gymnich'. Of course, plenty of official structures and organisations already exist and are collaborating to great effect. But what Europe and the United States need is a further, intimate reinforcement of our dialogue. An informal forum in which we can develop and subsequently follow up on a common agenda based on our shared values and objectives. We could use such an Atlantic Gymnich to set out a common approach to the Middle East and Africa, for example. We could also use it to improve our coordination of the resources deployed in the battle against terrorism or in the fight against weapons of mass destruction. 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 on 22 February is a clear signal of this, which we warmly welcome and value deeply. Now that the American presidential election is over, the time has come to draw a line under past tensions and look ahead to ascertain what we can do together for the Middle East, Africa or Iraq, for example. Because - and let me repeat this clearly - we all want the peace process in Iraq to succeed in 2005. Belgium has made one million euro available to the United Nations for the elections in Iraq. Yet there are other ways in which we can help. To take just one example, both Belgium and Europe have ample experience in drawing up a Constitution. Why should we not draw on this expertise for the Iraqi Constitution, which will have to be ready by around 15 August? So all things considered, there are enough questions and openings for us to make at least a serious effort to breathe new life into the Atlantic dialogue - a dialogue that can officially begin on 22 February. Mr President, Ladies and Gentlemen, The World Jewish Congress was set up in 1936 to unite the Jewish people and mobilise the world against the Nazi onslaught. Today you are represented in nearly 100 countries. The principles on which your organisation is based - namely peace, freedom and justice - have since become universal values. All the same, the message of the World Jewish Congress is just as pertinent today as it has always been. Accordingly, I was extremely concerned about the outcome of last year's Eurobarometer, which showed that a majority of Europeans view Israel as a greater threat to world peace than North Korea or Iran. In addition, many Jewish people all over the world are wrongly regarded as representatives of the Israeli government. Apart from that, we have already seen how the Israeli-Palestinian conflict causes tensions and aggression in other countries, even here in Belgium. This is and remains unacceptable. We will never tolerate seeing people subjected to physical or verbal aggression because of their nationality, colour or faith, any more than we can accept seeing all the members of a religious community - whether Jews, Christians or Muslims, indiscriminately being tarred with the same brush or forced onto the defensive. Belgium warmly welcomes the Jewish community in its midst. We acknowledge and value this contribution to our society. What is more, the Jewish community in our country has an important role to play in the fight

against racism and extremism. After all, it is precisely because the Jewish people have endured the worst possible discrimination that they have developed a stronger sense than most of us of what can go wrong in our society and a keen awareness of the warning signs indicative of such dangers. That is why we in the government attach great importance to their questions and observations. Thus, at the most recent meeting of our council of ministers at their request we designated 27 January as a day commemorating the genocide perpetrated by Nazi Germany. The key thing we ask of every member of the Jewish community is never to remain silent. Please continue to provide constructive criticism of what and where things go wrong. None of us can afford to let our society slide down the slippery slope of intolerance. Consequently, if we intend to make 2005 the year of renewed cooperation, of peace and stability, all of us have to regard that objective as a common undertaking. As Karl Popper said in his book «The Open Society and Its Enemies», "We should therefore claim, in the name of tolerance, the right not to tolerate the intolerant". Thank you for your attention.