

25 Nov 2003 -19:00

## Toespraak-Decoration ceremony for five german officers

Speech by Guy Verhofstadt, Prime Minister of Belgium at the decoration ceremony for five german officers.

Berlin, 25 November 2003.

Note: EMBARGO tot 17.00

Speech by Guy Verhofstadt, Prime Minister of Belgium at the decoration ceremony for five german officers. Berlin, 25 November 2003. Note: EMBARGO tot 17.00

Mister Secretary of State, Generals, Colonels, Ambassador, Ladies and Gentlemen, Since 1946, generations of Belgian soldiers have served in Western Germany. When Germany joined NATO in 1955, 40.000 Belgian soldiers were stationed in your country. 75.000 family members accompanied them. In 1993 the number was reduced to 25.000 soldiers. The last 2.000 troops left Germany only recently. Now there is only Vogelsang, the Training Area near Aachen. During those 55 years of Belgian military presence in Germany, our soldiers participated both in collective defence and in the defence of their own country while being stationed some four hundred kilometres beyond our borders. Nowadays, the geopolitical situation has changed drastically. The period of collective defence in Europe is more or less over. The new challenge for our troops lies in peacekeeping operations. For more than eight years our land forces have worked together in operations in Somalia, in the former Yugoslavia, in Macedonia and in Afghanistan. Our air forces carried out missions over Bosnian and Kosovo airspace. Our Navies fulfilled sea control and mine hunting missions all over the world. All those operations, which were carried out under the umbrella of NATO, the United Nations, the European Union or the Organisation for Security and Cooperation in Europe, resulted in a permanent exchange of know-how. These missions enabled our forces to become better acquainted with each other and to develop great mutual respect for each other's professionalism. As far as the European Security and Defence Policy is concerned, we share a lot of common viewpoints. We defend the same positions at the intergovernmental conference. We presented concrete proposals at the Defence Summit in Brussels, on 29 April of this year. I am convinced that these proposals can work as a catalyst for European Defence. We are both convinced that a stronger, more responsible and flexible Europe will result in a stronger NATO that will be better suited to the current geopolitical environment. The main reason that we are here this evening, is our common engagement in Afghanistan. Belgium participated in ISAF I by contributing air transport for humanitarian aid. Then, in November of last year, we received a request from the German Government to participate in ISAF III and later ISAF IV. Since then, we are participating in the Security and Stabilisation Mission in Kabul. Our contribution focuses on the Kabul International Airport where Belgian troops serve under the command of the German Forces. Our military presence has increased from 160 soldiers in February to 245 at present, which makes us the fifth largest troop-contributing nation in this theatre. This is also the second most important Belgian mission after KFOR. And at present, both planning staffs are coordinating Belgian participation in the KUNDUZ Provincial Reconstruction Team. This again is our response to a German request. I believe that the Forces at Kabul International Airport, both German and Belgian, are doing a very good job, because this mission is really crucial for the ISAF operation. Today, I want to honour those key military decision-makers who were responsible for the planning and implementation of ISAF III and ISAF IV. I am totally aware of the fact that commanders are not only managers of personnel, equipment, concepts and procedures, but that they also have to take responsibility for the lives of the soldiers, airmen and sailors serving under their command. On 7 September 2003, at the Government's proposal, King Albert II decided to honour the following

officers:Generalinspekteur der Bundeswehr Schneiderhan and General Riechmann, Joint Force Commander. These officers were responsible respectively for the strategic and operational military level of ISAF III. They are excellent, highly professional and experienced officers, who bravely shouldered their share of the moral and military responsibility of Belgian participation in ISAF III.General Hogrefe, Chief of Staff of the Bundeswehr Operations Command and also Chief of the ISAF Operations Coordination Centre and Colonel Brandstetter, Head of the Joint Operations Centre, had the same responsibilities towards the detachment but in the field of coordination, short time planning and the daily follow-up of the ISAF III operation. These highly trained officers organized a visit by the Belgian Minister of Defence this year. And finally Colonel Niebecker is Senior Officer in the Federal Chancellery. In this function he was instrumental in preparing the 29 April Defence Summit in Brussels. He is an open, honest and cooperative person who speaks all of our national languages, as he followed the courses at the Belgian War College in Brussels.I would like to thank all of these outstanding officers, not only for their professionalism during the ISAF III and IV operations, but also for the way in which they facilitate contacts with our Belgian Embassy here in Berlin. Their availability for our diplomats and military attaché is much appreciated.Ladies and Gentlemen, we will now proceed with the decoration ceremony. Thank you for your attention and my warmest congratulations to those who are to be decorated.