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!!! EMBARGO TILL 11.30H !!!

SPEECH BY PRIME MINISTER GUY VERHOFSTADT

AT THE OPENING OF THE REGIONAL UNITED NATIONS INFORMATION CENTRE IN THE PRESENCE OF
KOFI ANNAN, SECRETARY-GENERAL OF THE UNITED NATIONS

International Press Centre, 30 January 2004

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Mister Secretary-General, Ladies and Gentlemen, In the year 1000 before Christ, there were an estimated 600,000 independent political entities in the world. Today, in 2004, there are 193. This means that today there is only one independent entity left for every three thousand that used to exist. These figures show quite clearly which way history has been heading through the centuries and millennia. Together with the growing complexity and interdependence of social structures, history is evolving towards ever larger political blocs. Accordingly, the opening of this Regional United Nations Information Centre in Brussels is in line with expectations. I don't mean that the creation of this centre was foreordained long ago, but that it serves as acknowledgement of the European Union's growing importance as a supranational level within the United Nations. Soon, all United Nations Information Centres in Europe will be closed down and combined in the capital of the European Union. It makes sense to combine forces in this way, given the major developments the European Union has experienced in recent years and indeed recent months. The European Union began as a cooperative venture between six countries in the coal and steel sectors. On 1 May 2004, 25 member states will be united in a single European project based on peace, prosperity and democracy. Since 1999 Europe has had a High Representative for Common Foreign and Security Policy: Javier Solana. At the Intergovernmental Conference of the European Council in December 2003 the decision was taken to have Europe pursue its own defence policy. In short, the European Union is evolving increasingly towards a continent, which also holds its own place within the United Nations. In this respect, this is the ideal location for the information centre. Not only is this building located right in the centre of Brussels, but just across the street we have the building where the European Council meets and within a radius of one kilometre we have the buildings housing the European Parliament and the European Commission. In other words, setting up these UN offices here will no doubt shrink the distance between the UN and Europe, while at the same time enhancing communication between the two institutions. With this objective in mind, the Belgian government was very pleased indeed to provide these offices free of charge. The objectives of the United Nations are closely linked to the European Union's objective. Both bodies were established after the horrifying experiences of the Second World War, with the aim of working towards peace, greater and broader prosperity, and a healthy, socially aware and just world. I am convinced that with the opening of this Regional United Nations Information Centre in Brussels - right in the midst of the European institutions - we will be in a position to combine our forces and better achieve our common objectives. Thank you.