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SPEECH BY PRIME MINISTER GUY VERHOFSTADT ON THE OCCASION OF THE UNIVERSITY OF GHENT AWARDING AN HONORARY DOCTORATE TO MR KOFI ANNAN, SECRETARY-GENERAL OF THE UNITED NATIONS

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Monseigneur, Mr Secretary-General, Mr Rector, Ladies and Gentlemen, It is not every day that an honorary doctorate is awarded at my official residence, much less to the Secretary-General of the United Nations and a Nobel Peace Prize laureate. I would like to congratulate you on your honorary doctorate from the university where I also pursued my studies. Ladies and Gentlemen, The preamble to the Charter of the United Nations clearly states that the peoples of the United Nations must combine their efforts to prevent war, ensure compliance with human rights, enforce the rule of law and international law, and work towards social progress and better standards of life in larger freedom. Today, 59 years after the founding of the United Nations, the world has clearly made progress. Our world in 2004 is better than it was in 1945. That is due in part to the United Nations and its successive secretaries-general. Yet we still face enormous challenges. And I'm not just talking about Iraq. Every year some two million people die of tuberculosis, one million of malaria and three million of AIDS. Dozens of guerrilla wars and civil wars are raging around the globe. Some 840 million people are hungry: all day, every day. Take, for instance, the Human Development Report for 2003, which classifies countries according to life expectancy, education and disposable income. The top 25 spots include the Western European countries and countries such as the United States, Japan, Australia and Israel. The bottom 25 spots are all held by countries in sub-Saharan Africa. From this I have learnt three things. First, I see that Greece, Ireland, Spain and Portugal are amongst the top 25 countries, whereas 20 years ago they were not. It was their membership of the European Union and the strong solidarity between EU member states that propelled these countries so far forward. This is a hopeful sign for the Central and Eastern European countries that will soon be joining the EU. Second, as long as we in Europe and America continue to impose high import duties and award significant export subsidies, we are not really giving other countries in the world a chance for economic growth and human development. Third, we urgently need to pay more attention and offer more development aid to sub-Saharan Africa. Many of these countries are going through or recovering from debilitating civil wars. Here, I am thinking in particular of the very difficult social, political and economic reconstruction of Congo, Rwanda and Burundi, countries with which Belgium has special ties. Mr Secretary-General, In the past, I have often advocated replacing the G8 or G10 of rich countries with a G8 or G10 of continental groups. These groups are currently structured at regional level into organisations such as the European Union, the North American Free Trade Agreement, the Association of South-East Asian Nations, the Arab League and the African Union. In view of the success of the European Union, I think it is a good idea to encourage similar forms of cooperation on other continents. The EU has brought prosperity to Europe. This should also be possible for the other continents. Thank you.