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Speech by Belgian Prime Minister Guy Verhofstadt

At a lunch held for the Rwandan delegation on the occasion of the official visit by Mr. Paul Kagamé, President of the republic of Rwanda

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Mr President, Excellencies, Ladies and Gentlemen, We already had the opportunity to meet on several occasions, but today it is an honour and a pleasure for me to welcome you on your first official visit to Belgium. It is now almost 90 years since the paths of Belgium and Rwanda first crossed an encounter that has not always been without difficulties. Throughout the colonial and post-colonial era, relations between our two countries have sometimes been tense but the bond between us has held fast through good times and bad. This visit shows our dedication and common goal to further develop and strengthen the ties between our nations. We are all very much aware of the fact that this visit is taking place on the eve of the tenth anniversary of the 1994 genocide. Four years ago, in April 2000 in Kigali, I was given the opportunity to participate in the commemoration of the genocide. Next month, I shall be returning to Kigali with the Belgian ministers for Foreign Affairs, Defense and Development Cooperation not only to remember those who perished, but also to reflect on the future. Mr. President, By electing you to this high office, the Rwandan people have entrusted you with the responsibility of defending and respecting the values of democracy, pluralism, and human rights. Be assured of Belgium's commitment to support you in this challenging task. For full democracy and freedom of expression are the true guarantees of sustainable reconciliation. We are very pleased that the reconciliation process in Rwanda over the past year has been accompanied by equally encouraging developments in its neighbours Burundi and the Democratic Republic of Congo. Over the past ten years, these countries have also been engulfed in a spiral of violence which, has unsettled the entire region and which has resulted in several more million victims. Given Belgium's historic links with these three countries, my government has spared no effort in lending its continuous support to the peace process throughout the region. It is my strong belief that today central Africa is on the right track. We encourage you to push ahead and to strengthen Rwanda's ties with its neighbours. The current drive for peace must be fostered and made to flourish. Only regional integration can prevent renewed conflict and Belgium is prepared to fully support you in this approach. We cannot deny that reconstruction and reconciliation in Rwanda, but also in Burundi and the DRC will require continued efforts and perseverance of its leaders. Such process demands time and determination. I am thinking here not only of socio-economic developments but also of strengthening the rule of law, ensuring justice with respect to war crimes, as well as demobilisation of the military and the construction or, indeed, reconstruction of civil society, the education system and healthcare. These are also the sectors where Belgian development cooperation can help and make its expertise available. Central Africa is a top priority of Belgium's foreign policy and we are proud of it. We put this policy into practice through bilateral state-to-state aid, multilateral aid, and through our support of a variety of non-governmental initiatives. Belgium is also playing a pioneering role in defending central African interests in international organisations, particularly within the European Union. For no one should be indifferent to the reconstruction of Rwanda and of central Africa as a whole, which demands that we pool all our efforts and capabilities. In line with this conviction, my government has opted firmly for substantially greater financial contributions to assist Belgium's three key bilateral partners in central Africa in terms of international cooperation. Our focus is

threefold: (i) supporting the peace and reconciliation processes, (ii) strengthening the rule of law, and (iii) helping the most vulnerable sections of the population to overcome poverty. But we recognize that such development policy cannot be imposed from outside but must be borne by the Rwandan people themselves as they remain the master of their own fate. Mr President, Excellencies, Ladies and Gentlemen, Throughout the region, the prospects for peace and reconciliation are better now than at any point in the past ten years. The international community is ready to support and consolidate all developments that will help drive this process forward. Now, more than ever before, Rwanda should take this opportunity, build its future, develop prosperity and safeguard stability. Rwanda can count on Belgium to achieve these goals. Rwanda remains one of Belgium's key partners. It can count on our support and our solidarity in a spirit of dialogue and transparency. And on that note, may I ask you all to raise your glasses to President Kagame, in a toast to peace and security for Rwanda and to friendship and cooperation between our countries. Thank you.