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### **Karel De Gucht on Kosovo's declaration of independence**

Foreign Minister Karel De Gucht duly noted the declaration of Kosovo's independence made at an extraordinary session of the Kosovan parliament this afternoon.

"This declaration of independence is a milestone in the debate about Kosovo's status that has already been going for a very long time. It must be said that the status quo appeared no longer tenable. The crucial factor here is that the region's stability and security remain guaranteed. In that connection I welcome the call for respect and tolerance of all communities in Kosovo, the commitment to make a priority of implementing the Ahtisaari plan, including all the guarantees about the rule-of-law state, shared administration, freedom of and respect for language, culture and religion. Moreover, I salute the will to strive for good neighbourly relations in the region", Minister De Gucht said.

The European Union already pledged to help ensure the region's continuing security and stability a long time ago. Accordingly, back in December 2007, the European Council gave its green light to deploy a European Union 'rule-of-law' mission in Kosovo. Belgium is also helping to stabilise the region, having already contributed 190 military personnel (to NATO's KFOR) and being poised to send out 45 civilian experts as part of the EU-Lex mission.

Thus, both Europe and Belgium will continue to maintain their commitment of several years' standing to the region. Tomorrow's European General Affairs and External Relations Council, attended by EU foreign ministers, will discuss exactly what this will entail in the near future.

Recognition of Kosovo's independence is a national affair, but must be seen within a broader European context. Accordingly, Belgium will only issue a statement on recognition after tomorrow's European consultations.

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