

**Fifth International Conference of Tibet Support Groups
Brussels, 11-14 May 2007**

**Welcome Address by Walter Muls, President of Belgian Inter-Parliamentary Group for
Tibet**

Honourable guests, ladies & gentlemen, friends,

It is with mixed feelings and with hesitation that I am addressing you these words of welcome at the beginning of the 5th International Conference of Tibet Support Groups.

Mixed feelings because, on the one hand I am proud that you have chosen Brussels, city where I was born and that I love, as the centre for your conference and your attention.

Mixed feelings on the other hand, because I am deeply aware of the impact that the presence of the Dalai Lama can have on your magnificent work in different corners of the world, which deserves the largest possible recognition.

There for I am ashamed that the Belgian government and the Belgian diplomacy did not have the courage to withstand to the unacceptable pressure and involvement of the Chinese government concerning the presence of his holiness the Dalai Lama in the capital of Europe.

In 2005 the visit of his holiness to Belgium was postponed for a year in view of the visit of the Belgian king and queen to China. Now, in 2007, history repeats itself as another member of the royal family will be going to China in a few weeks from now on an economic mission.

It is not an act of courage to invoke economical reasons, and to let prevail money issues over talking about the respect for human rights in Tibet.

It is not an act of courage when the Minister of foreign Affairs only condemns China in parliament with just words when it shoots Tibetans fleeing for oppression.

It is neither an act of courage for a Prime Minister to be photographed with the Dalai Lama, to use this picture in an election period, but not saying honestly and openly and in time, why his holiness can not come to Belgium to speak at this World conference, but putting the pressure on his shoulders by saying that it is up to the Dalai Lama to decide in all freedom to come or not come and to address the Conference of TSG's.

The Dalai Lama and the Tibetan people know all about this kind of "freedom". This is not a free choice, this is an imposing matter.

This only indicates what everybody, involved in the struggle for the respect for Tibet, its people, its culture and its leaders, feels that is that the Chinese government uses, regretfully, its growing economical power as a blackmail instrument on other governments.

We can only hope that this is not an indication of how the atmosphere will be at the coming round of Tibetan-Chinese talks.

I am aware that my speech is not very diplomatic, but then, I am not a diplomat, but it is an expression of my concern. I respect the Chinese people, but have difficulties with the Chinese

government. It is that government that ordered the shooting of defenceless refugees in the Mountains, filmed by a Romanian TV crew.

I know that the Chinese embassy in Brussels is keeping a close look and a close ear to this conference and I am glad. So we can reach out a hand to them, and ask the officials to let go the old rhetorical lines, the old mantra lines, and say to them use your efforts and start an open dialogue, instead of putting your efforts in a fight over Tibet that you lose when it comes to conscience.

It is not a fight, it is not a battle, it is an issue of basic human rights.

When the Dalai Lama addressed the Belgian Parliament last year, he repeated what he is repeating over and over again. The Tibetans do not demand a separation, but ask a meaningful autonomy with respect for culture, language, religion, etc.

The Chinese ambassador to Belgium said the same week in radio broadcast that the visit of the Dalai Lama was damaging. I am also repeating myself, Mrs. ambassador open your mind, open your heart, and when the Dalai Lama comes to Belgium, don't fight him, because he is non-violent, but talk to him, then you get everybody's respect.

You will learn everything about peace, non-violence, middle way approach, and above all respect for all peoples on your territory and outside your territory.
Also ask yourself if the younger generation of Tibetans will still be that patient after more than 50 years occupation.

Honourable guests, ladies and gentlemen, friends, I understand and I share your disappointment, concerning the absence of the Dalai Lama, but I can assure you, and that positive lessons can be taught out of this incident.

A first lesson is that the public opinion in Belgium does not, and will not understand why a worldwide highly respected Nobel Prize winner can not come here for not more than 24 hours. I can only invite you check the national newspapers crying out their outrage on the issues.

The second lesson is a marketing lesson. With this incident you will get more press coverage than without it, although that is just a small comfort.

The third, and I honestly think, even more important lesson to learn is, is what the impact of the TSG's is.

If the Chinese government would consider the Tibet Support Groups as harmless, as a group of powerless people with little of no impact they would not have bothered. The fact that they do bother, and that they put pressure, means on the contrary that they really know what your influence and power is on the public opinion and on decision makers.

That is why your presence here, and your work year in year out is so extremely important and is so much appreciated. And that is why, despite this incident, I am nevertheless very glad to welcome you.