

PublicationDate: 06-02-2001

PUBLICATION: BANGKOK POST

PAGE: 4

KEYWORD: Thai-Belgium relations, Crown Prince Philippe

LABEL: STATE VISIT

HEADLINE: Belgian prince to arrive

SUBHEADLINE: Week-long visit to promote trade links

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Crown Prince Philippe, the eldest son of King Albert II and Queen Paola of Belgium, and Princess Mathilde will be presiding over the Feb 12-17 Belgian economic mission to Bangkok.

The week-long mission _ also attended by Annemie Neyts-Uyttebroeck, the Belgian secretary for foreign affairs, and representatives of 57 Belgian companies as well as the Board of Investment and the Industrial Estate Authority of Thailand _ is intended to strengthen trade links between the two countries and reinforce the image of Belgium in the world.

``This economic mission is surely one of the most important events occurring in recent years in the history of Thai-Belgian relations," said Pierre Vaesen, the Belgian ambassador to Thailand.

He stressed that trade between Thailand and Belgium had recovered from the crisis years, and that total exports to Thailand early last year reached 16.8 billion baht, with Thai exports to Belgium crossing 34 billion baht _ an increase of almost 50% compared to the same period in 1999.

On Feb 13, the Belgian crown prince and princess will be granted an audience with His Majesty the King at the beach resort of Hua Hin.

Numerous cultural events presided over by Richard Miller, the Belgian minister of fine arts, will also be held, including a Belgian-Thai fashion show, conferences and various art exhibitions by Belgian contemporary painters and sculptors.

Princess Mathilde, who married Prince Philippe in December 1999, will spend a lot of her time on social issues. On Feb 12, she will attend a meeting organised by UNAIDS and MSF Belgium, and on Feb 14 visit Kredtrakarn Protection and Occupational Development Centre as well as the Foundation for the Deaf and Setsatian School for the Deaf.