

**Welcome Address by Paul Rietjens, Director General of Legal Affairs,
IDEA Conference on Traditional Justice and Reconciliation
Brussels (Egmont Palace), 6 February 2008**

Madame Deputy Prosecutor,
M. Chief Registrar,
Excellencies,
Distinguished participants,

On behalf of the Belgian Minister of Foreign Affairs, Mr. Karel De Gucht, it is a pleasure for me to welcome you in our beautiful venue, the Egmont Palace, for this international conference on traditional justice and reconciliation after violent conflict. While transitional justice has been a rapidly evolving field of experiences over the last decades since the end of the Second World War, traditional justice has remained largely unnoticed for a very long time. Too often traditional justice mechanisms have been considered as outdated, backwards, irrational or irrelevant. But this was only the case in Western eyes. For many communities in war torn countries, they have remained of value. And an increasing number of people today believe that traditional justice mechanisms, not as a surrogate but as a useful complementary tool to retributive trials, can really bring an effective answer to the overwhelming need of justice after a protracted war, or after years of terror by illegal armed groups.

Looking around the room, I can tell that this number of people is rapidly growing. We estimated from beforehand that maybe up to 80 people could be interested to attend this conference. To our big surprise, you were 180 to register. This is a very clear indicator of the rapidly growing interest generated by the subject of traditional justice mechanisms. And this interest is plural: today in this room you can meet scholars, as well as civil society experts. We have civil servants in duty, as well as field practitioners. The encounter between all of us, and the exchange of ideas generated by the proposals launched by the research team, will definitely be the most important output of today's conference.

Our expectations are high. As SG Vidar Helgesen already pointed out, the role of Belgium has been a financial one in the first place. The Peace Consolidation Unit of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, directed by Ambassador Luc Teirlinck, has at its disposal two subsidy lines that allow investing in peace processes: "preventive diplomacy" and "conflict prevention". This money is used as much as possible for short term impact in the field. But this justifiable urge should not make us forget that focused research has its own value. Research that brings to our attention approaches that do work in certain circumstances, does not necessarily lead us to blueprint thinking. We all know that in the variety of cultural contexts throughout the world, traditional practices can not simply be grafted from one country to another. Hence that is not the purpose of IDEA's research, nor is it the wishful thinking of this

conference. What we expect from our exchanges today, is to gain new insights from real life experiences of social healing. Insights that can be a source of inspiration for concrete recommendations to both policy makers and field practitioners. Insights that can give other countries new ideas on how to deal with their violent past.

The Democratic Republic of Congo has been going for over a decade, and is still going today through a very difficult period of its history. Untold violence has been rampant for much too long now, and impunity needs to be halted urgently. The United Nations are preparing to collect evidence from the East of Congo in what they call a mapping exercise of human rights violations. The idea is to preserve the evidence as much as possible, until the time comes when all violations will be dealt with. But how realistic is it to expect that all perpetrators will be identified and punished, that all victims will be done justice? Let us try to find elements of answers to these questions from the experiences of other countries. The wisdom of Congolese traditional approaches and a genuine participation of the population in the elaboration of context-specific mechanisms carry forward high hopes that in Congo too the way out of the vicious circle of violence and impunity will be found soon.

Before handing you over to the chair for what promises to be a most inspiring conference, let me conclude by congratulating IDEA for taking the initiative of this timely field research, and for the excellent output of the whole exercise. A lot of credit for the quality of the report goes to the researchers, whom we salute amongst us today, and to the case study coordinator, Prof. Luc Huyse, whom we know and appreciate not only as one of the most respected contributors to the internal debate in Belgium, but also as one of our prominent world citizens.

I wish you all a very rich exchange and together with Minister De Gucht we are looking forward to the recommendations, and your concrete suggestions for their applicability in real life circumstances.

Thank you