

OFFICIAL NAME: Kingdom of Belgium

CAPITAL: Brussels

SYSTEM OF GOVERNMENT: Constitutional Monarchy

AREA: 30,540 Sq Km (11,792 Sq Mi)

ESTIMATED 2000 POPULATION 10,145,600



LOCATION & GEOGRAPHY: Belgium is located in North West Europe. It is bound by the Netherlands to the north, France to the south, Germany to the east, Luxembourg to the southeast and the North Sea to the northwest. The country's topography is that of a great fertile low lying plain which constitutes the north and west. South of central Belgium the terrain consists of rolling undulating hills and valleys which rise gradually to the east. Further south and to the east the hills give way to the mountainous Ardennes forests. The principal river in the southern Wallonia region is the Meuse with its tributaries the Semois, Sambre and Ourthe while the Scheldt with its tributaries is the principal river for the northern Flanders region. Major Cities (pop. est.); Brussels 136,000, Antwerp 473,000, Ghent 231,000, Charleroi 208,000, Liege 199,000 (1991). Land Use; forested 21%, pastures 21%, agricultural-cultivated 24%, other 34% (1992).

CLIMATE: Belgium has a cool and temperate climate with strong maritime influences. The lowland areas are characterized by changing winds, summer thunderstorms with drizzle and an overcast sky. The northwest area is characterized by a mild climate with fog. The interior experiences more extreme summers while winters in the upland regions are colder and have greater frost and rain. Average annual precipitation varies from 510 to 760 mm (20 to 30 inches) to 1,200 mm (47 inches) in the hills of the south. Average temperature ranges in Brussels are from -1 to 4 degrees Celsius (30 to 39 degrees Fahrenheit) in January to 12 to 23 degrees Celsius (54 to 73 degrees Fahrenheit) in July.

PEOPLE: Originally the people of Belgium were of Celtic origin, although most were wiped out during the Christian era. Belgium is now comprised of Celtic, Roman, German, French, Dutch, Spanish and Austrian descendants. Today Belgium is divided linguistically with two main groups (1.) the Dutch speakers called Flemings and (2.) the French speakers called Walloons. Other ethnic minorities include immigrants from Italy, Morocco, Turkey, Spain, Algeria, Portugal and Zaire.

DEMOGRAPHIC/VITAL STATISTICS: Density; 327 persons per sq km (847 persons per sq mi) (1991). Urban-Rural; 96.5% urban, 3.5% rural (1989). Sex Distribution; 48.9% male, 51.1% female (1990). Life Expectancy at Birth; 70.0 years male, 76.8 years female (1982). Age Breakdown; 18% under 15, 23% 15 to 29, 22% 30 to 44, 17% 45 to 59, 14% 60 to 74, 6% 75 and over (1989). Birth Rate; 12.2 per 1,000 (1989). Death Rate; 10.8 per 1,000 (1989). Increase Rate; 1.4 per 1,000 (1989). Infant Mortality Rate; 8.6 per 1,000 live births (1989).

RELIGIONS: Mostly Christians with 90% of the population Roman Catholic. The principal religious minority are Sunni Muslims which account for 1.1% of the population. Other minorities include Jews, Protestants and Orthodox Christians which are found in scattered communities.

LANGUAGES: The official languages are Flemish (Dutch), French and German. With approximately 56% of the population speaking Dutch while 32% speak French and 1% speak German. Various dialects are spoken by the Flemish and Walloons, although it is less common in public or formal situations and is more common in rural areas and informal situations.

EDUCATION: Aged 25 or over and having attained: less than secondary 64.4%, lower secondary 16.0%, upper secondary 10.0%, vocational 3.7%,

higher 5.9% (1977). Literacy; literate population aged 15 or over virtually 100% (1988).

MODERN HISTORY - WWII TO 1993: The unity of Belgium was threatened by the conflict over state subsidization of Roman Catholic private schools during the 1950's. In 1951 a national referendum showed that most Belgians favored the return of King Leopold III, however, disorder escalated upon the Kings return from exile which forced him to abdicate in favor of his son Prince Baudouin. In 1960 Belgium granted Belgian Congo now Zaire independence which resulted in some further economic hardship. New laws established a definitive linguistic frontier causing universities to split into separate Dutch and French speaking institutions and in 1971 the constitution was revised to prepare the way for autonomy. An agreement was finally reached in 1980 for autonomy for Flanders and Walloons and further amendments were finally introduced that widened the financial and legislative powers of the regions. In 1990 a crisis was narrowly avoided because King Baudouin refused to approve a bill which would legalize abortions, although it had been approved by both houses of Parliament. In 1991 there were further disputes between the French Socialists and the Flemish Social Christian coalition over the third stage of state reforms that included direct elections for the regional assemblies, the right of regions to conclude international agreements such as arms sales and more delineated functions for the Senate and the House of Representatives. After a long awaited contract to upgrade telephone system was submitted to the government a dispute over regional radio and television taxes erupted between the factions and ultimately resulted in the collapse of the government. However, Prime Minister Martens' resignation overturned by the King so that the essential legislation could be enacted and the situation in Zaire involving Belgian troops could be dealt with. Immigration also became an increasingly important political issue with the government approving a bill granting automatic citizenship to third-generation immigrants. In Nov. 1991 elections resulted in a swing to the far right and far left with the Flemish Liberals unable to form a government. On Dec. 19, 1991 the King requested the French Social Christians, led by Melchior Wathelet, to begin negotiations. Also during

1991, King Baudouin celebrated his 60th birthday and his 40 years as head of state while a constitutional change to allow women to accede to the throne was also agreed to by all parties. In 1992 the Social Christian and Socialist coalition remained in government, although Jean-Luc Dehaene was appointed as the new prime minister in March. During 1992 the two major objectives, namely the reform of state structures and a budget deficit reduction in line with the Maastricht Treaty requirements, resulted in a political deadlock. In Sept. 1992, the Dehaene called a meeting of top coalition politicians to end the stalemate. An agreement was found that would establish Belgium as a truly federal state with parliamentary elections held every four years and regional assembly elections held every five years while the powers of the Senate were to be curtailed. In 1993 some 289 days after the so-called "St Michael's" agreements between the Social Christian and Socialist coalition parties, the two houses of Parliament with the support of the Green and Volksunie parties approved the constitution changes that would turn Belgium into a federal state. In Mar. 1993 Prime Minister Dehaene tendered his resignation which the King refused to accept after a budgetary crisis within the government. A solution was reached by the coalition parties on measures to reduce the deficit which included the privatization of a number of public companies. During 1993 the number of unemployed and bankruptcies increased dramatically while compulsory military service was also abolished. Also in 1993 the death of King Boudouin resulted in the accession of his younger brother Albert II to the throne on August 9, 1993.

CURRENCY: The official currency is the Euro divided into 100 cents.

ECONOMY: Gross National Product; USD \$213,435,000,000 (1993). Public Debt; USD \$250,900,000,000 (1995). Imports; BF 3,791,874,000,000 (1993). Exports; BF 4,158,382,000,000 (1993). Tourism Receipts; USD \$4,071,000,000 (1993). Balance of Trade; BF 65,200,000 (1992). Economically Active Population; 4,088,600 or 40.6% of total population (1992). Unemployed; 7.7% (1992).

MAIN TRADING PARTNERS: Its main trading partners are Luxembourg, Germany, France, the Netherlands, the UK, Italy and the USA.

MAIN PRIMARY PRODUCTS: Barley, Coal, Flax, Hay, Livestock, Oats, Potatoes, Sugar Beets, Timber, Vegetables, Wheat.

MAJOR INDUSTRIES: Cement, Chemicals, Coal Mining, Diamond Cutting, Food Processing, Glass, Iron and Steel, Light and Heavy Engineering, Paper Goods, Petroleum Refining, Textiles.

MAIN EXPORTS: Chemicals, Cut Diamonds, Foodstuffs, Iron and Steel, Machinery, Motor Vehicles, Petroleum Products, Textile Products.

TRANSPORT: Railroads; route length 3,568 km (2,217 mi) (1989), passenger-km 6,396,000,000 (3,974,000,000 passenger-mi) (1989), cargo ton-km 8,052,000,000 (5,515,000,000 short ton-mi) (1989). Roads; length 128,345 km (79,750 mi) (1988). Vehicles; cars 3,864,159 (1990), trucks and buses 358,885 (1990). Merchant Marine; vessels 330 (1990), deadweight tonnage 3,116,308 (1990). Air Transport; passenger-km 6,756,000,000 (4,198,000,000 passenger-mi) (1989), cargo ton-km 686,196,000 (469,976,000 short ton-mi) (1989).

COMMUNICATIONS: Daily Newspapers; total of 46 with a total circulation of 3,186,700 (1994). Radio; receivers 7,640,000 (1994). Television; receivers 4,200,000 (1994). Telephones; units 4,395,700 (1993).

MILITARY: 63,000 (1992) total active duty personnel with 76.2% army, 4.6% navy and 19.2% air force while military expenditure accounts for 1.8% (1993) of the Gross National Product (GNP).