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Address by H.E. Dr. Vaira Vike-Freiberga, President of Latvia, at a luncheon hosted by H. E. Mr. Tung Chee-hwa, Chief Executive of the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region, April 17, 2004

Honourable Mr. Tung,
Mrs. Tung,
Excellencies,
Ladies and gentlemen,

It is a great pleasure for me to be here in Hong Kong, and to be received with the legendary warmth and hospitality for which the people of Hong Kong are widely known. Although I have been to this beautiful territory before, this is my first time here as President of the Republic of Latvia.

The Administrative Territory of Hong Kong, despite its relatively small size, is truly a financial and transport centre of world importance. According to the US Heritage Foundation, Hong Kong bears the distinction of having the worlds freest economy. Hong Kongs success is a great inspiration to Latvia, which itself is becoming an increasingly important centre of transit and trade in Northern Europe. Presently my country handles more cargo than any other country in the Baltic Sea region, and I am convinced that Latvia could serve as a valuable trade and business partner to Hong Kong.

Today I had a productive and promising meeting with this luncheons charming host, the Honourable Mr. Tung Chee-hwa, Chief Executive of the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region. Together we agreed that there are many opportunities for building more bridges of partnership and cooperation between Hong Kong and Latvia, and that we already have a solid base from which to start.

Latvia and Hong Kong are already working to develop closer relations. In September of 2002, Latvia and Hong Kong signed a visa-free agreement. Cooperation has also been established between our governments in the field of financial regulations. Consultations are taking place between the Latvian Foreign Ministry and several Hong Kong institutions, including the Commerce, Industry and Technology Bureau, the Economic Development and Labour Bureau, and the Home Affairs Bureau. I hope that such discussions and exchanges between our governmental delegations lead to a substantial increase in trade and investment between Hong Kong and Latvia, particularly in the field of sea transport.

My visit to Hong Kong is taking place at a historical moment for Latvia. Latvia has just joined the NATO Alliance and in less than a month, on May the 1st, my country will become a full member of the European Union. Latvias accession to these two organizations will provide additional stability to Northern Europe and will make Latvia even more attractive as a business and investment location for entrepreneurs from Hong Kong.

The Latvian business delegation that has accompanied me to Hong Kong includes fifty leading company executives who represent such varied sectors as ports and shipbuilding, information technologies and telecommunications, logistics and financial services, heavy industry and construction, woodworking and food processing, tourism and trade. I hope that this visit will lead to the creation of new and mutually beneficial partnerships between Hong Kong and Latvian enterprises.

Active exchanges between Latvia and Hong Kong are already taking place in the fields of arts and culture. Culture speaks directly to peoples hearts.

It provides an indispensable sense of tradition and values. During the past few years, the National Opera of Latvia has given several performances in Hong Kong, which I am told were very well received. I would like to extend my particular gratitude to one outstanding native of Hong Kong who is a great friend of Latvia, the virtuous opera star, artistic manager and director, Mr. Warren Mock. Mr. Mock has given splendid performances in Latvia and has produced a musical CD recording together with the Latvian opera star Sonora Vaice.

I take this opportunity to express my deepest gratitude to another outstanding personality, Mr. Roger King, who has accepted the honour and the obligations of representing the Republic of Latvia in Hong Kong. I also thank Mr. Kings wonderful family, who are supporting him fully in this responsible and demanding position. It is a great honour for Latvia to be represented by someone as well-known and highly respected as Mr. King. We consider ourselves doubly fortunate to have Mrs. Alice King associated with Latvia. Mrs. King is a great promoter of the arts and plays a prominent role in Hong Kongs arts community. It is a genuine privilege for Latvia to be associated with such a distinguished family.

I would also like to express my thanks and appreciation to the small but well-situated and resourceful Latvian community in Hong Kong. Some of the Latvians who are living here are old friends of my family. This community has served as important but informal link between Hong Kong and Latvia. It has even founded its own Latvian association here called *Talka*.

Honourable Mr. Tung,

Mrs. Tung,

Dear friends,

I would now like to propose a toast.

To the health and happiness of the Chief Executive of the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region, the Honourable Mr. Tung Chee-hwa.

To the health and happiness of Mrs. Tung, and to the health and happiness of the people of Hong Kong.

To the continued dynamism of the vibrant Latvian community in Hong Kong.

To the continued growth, prosperity and success of the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region.

And to a growing partnership and friendship between the people of Hong Kong and Latvia.