

Belgium's King Albert II abdicates in favor of son Philippe

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USPA News - Belgium's King Albert II abdicated the throne Sunday after nearly two decades as head of state, saying he has become too old and frail to continue carrying out the largely ceremonial role, and allowing his eldest son Philippe to take over. Philippe, 53, took the oath and was sworn in as the country's seventh king during a ceremony in parliament.

"I am aware of the responsibility which is now incumbent upon me. This oath is a solemn promise which renews the relationship of trust that has existed for nearly two hundred years between the King and the Belgian people," he said. The trained air force pilot, who was educated at Oxford and Stanford, thanked his father for "maintaining this trust" by being close to the people while also being attentive and committed in the exercising of his responsibilities as head of state. He further thanked his mother, Queen Paola, for assisting Albert II while devoting herself to fields such as education and culture. "With serenity, dignity and devotion, you have accompanied the Belgian people on sometimes difficult occasions, as well as during happy moments, at a time marked by profound change throughout the world," Philippe said of his father during the swearing-in ceremony. "We are most grateful to you." The new king said he was fortunate to be able to count on the support of his wife, Queen Mathilde, and complimented her for her "innate sense" of human contact. "Along with our dear children, we shall confidently begin this new chapter in our lives and that of our country," he said. To warm applause, Philippe promised to uphold the country's constitution. "I am beginning my reign with the determination to place myself at the service of all Belgians. I shall therefore work in perfect understanding with the government and consistent with the Constitution," he remarked, adding that he intends to intensify his ties with the people. Philippe also reaffirmed his support for the European Union (EU), saying it should be a source of hope and confidence. "The Europe we are working towards must bring growth and solidarity. We are proud that our capital city is also the capital of Europe and that at each moment in its history, Belgian leaders have worked at the heart of this great project," he said. Sunday's ceremony took place on the country's national day, which celebrates the independence it achieved on July 21, 1831. On that day, Leopold I took the oath as the first King of Belgium. The nation was at that moment part of the United Kingdom of the Netherlands, a state conformed by the U.K., Prussia, Russia and Austria after Napoleon's defeat at Waterloo in 1815. Anders Fogh Rasmussen, the secretary-general of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) which is headquartered in Brussels, extended his "heartfelt congratulations" to the Belgian people on their national day. "Belgium is a pillar of our Alliance and plays an important role as host to the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation and its military command, for which all Allies are extremely grateful," he said. Rasmussen added: "King Albert is a committed European. I warmly thank him for his dedication to the transatlantic bond over the past 20 years. We look forward to working just as closely with King Philippe." In the United States, National Security Council spokeswoman Caitlin Hayden congratulated Philippe and his wife Mathilde on the historic occasion. "[President Barack Obama] also sends his heartfelt appreciation to King Albert II for his warmth, service, and leadership as he steps down after nearly 20 years," she said. Meanwhile, in Moscow, Russian President Vladimir Putin sent messages to both Albert II and Philippe. He congratulated Philippe on his accession to the throne and expressed confidence that the Russian-Belgian relationship will continue to develop in all major areas for the benefit of Russia, Belgium and all of Europe.

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