7,000 jobs lost in the construction sector over the last year

According to Nacebo, the Flemish SME construction federation, more than 7,000 jobs have been lost in the construction sector in the space of a year. 30% of Flemish construction companies have to call on periods of temporary unemployment. The construction barometer, which sounds out the socio-economic climate among SMEs in the construction sector, dropped into the red in March. The volume of work is falling, order books are not as full as they were, and competition is increasing, with the possible result that the sector will end up in a negative price spiral. Nacebo is calling on the government to make greater investment efforts in order to turn the tide (FF).

HET VOLK • 28 MARCH

Economic unemployment in the construction sector was 32% higher in 2002 than in 2001, and will continue to rise, according to Nacebo. Many construction companies will have to carry through restructuring, in other words, downsizing. Contractors have also noted that government investment in the building of roads, other infrastructure or social housing is failing to materialise. According to figures from the National Bank, public works in the period 1990-2000 accounted for only 1.7% of Gross Domestic Product. In the European Union that figure is 2.6%. And according to Nacebo, that figure has taken a further sizeable tumble in the last two years, mainly because the municipalities do not have any more money. Nacebo is calling on all the authorities to issue more invitations to tender for public works again, and to spread these works evenly over time. ‘At the moment we have the impression that a lot is done in years when there are municipal elections, and a lot less in other years,’ says the managing director of Nacebo Karel Van Eetvelt. The trends in the construction sector of less new building of houses, more new building of apartments and more renovation, are being confirmed in the first quarter of 2003. ‘Since the Batibouw Trade Fair the number of applications for mortgages has indeed risen markedly on account of the low interest rates, but this has not resulted in a revival in the construction sector,’ says Harry Van Meerbeeck of the Building Confederation. ‘A lot of people are using these to make alterations or conversions that they have put off or are buying an extra apartment as an investment, but the building of new houses remains weak’. WWW.NACEBO.BE

INTRODUCTION

‘W’e shall be talking about the war; not the one in Iraq but the one in Antwerp’. This was how the brand new chairman of the Flemish Socialists Steve Stevaert opened his press conference on Monday 24 March. The struggle between VLD and SPA for the post of mayor of Antwerp has already kept Flanders enthralled for two weeks, and is being played out along the lines of trench warfare. Stevaert came to this same press conference to explain how far his party could go in its concessions. The SPA accepts the setting up of an ‘integrated bureau’ by the Liberal candidate mayor Covelliers and its candidate Patrick Janssens, who also heads the SPA’s list for the parliamentary elections on 18 May, has stated that he is prepared to give up his mandate in the House if he becomes mayor. As VLD chairman Karel De Gucht demanded. However, Stevaert delicately added that this rule should actually apply to all mayors and aldermen in Flanders. But withdrawing Janssens’ candidacy could not be done, said Stevaert, who recalled the city government agreement which states that the largest party supplies the mayor. Despite these concessions the local VLD branch is refusing to budge. Officially it is sticking to the view that this is the time for a break to be made with the long tradition of Socialist administration in Antwerp, and that in its view a Liberal mayor is therefore the only correct signal of renewal. Not coincidentally it was the mayor of Mechelen Bart Somers (VLD) who expressed the Liberals’ standpoint only correct signal of renewal. Not coincidentally it was the mayor of Mechelen Bart Somers (VLD) who expressed the Liberals’ standpoint two weeks ago. Somers, who likes to cite Mechelen as a model approach for urban problems, also heads the list of VLD candidates for parliament in the province of Antwerp. But Somers himself is now having to deal with some quite vociferous opposition from a number of CD&V aldermen in his city. They do not tolerate the fact that he is using all the city council’s achievements to create a profile for himself in the parliamentary elections. The conflict in Antwerp is therefore not only stuck fast, but is also expanding outside Antwerp as well, in the view of a number of commentators. Speaking for the CD&V in Antwerp, alderman Marc Van Peel feels that these political games should stop now, once and for all. They make him think of Saddam Hussein: ‘He also knows that he is facing his downfall, but he is calmly carrying on’. De Morgen (25 March) called the orchestra of the Titanic an example of a sense of responsibility compared with the spectacle going on in Antwerp. Gazet van Antwerpen (25 March) put it less metaphorically: it is likely that on 18 May there will be only one winner in Antwerp and far beyond: the Vlaams Blok. (See also table p.4)

Frank Vandecaveye | editor in chief
Greens and socialists call for termination of secret agreement with USA

American troops in the Gulf are still being provisioned via the port of Antwerp and the airport of Ostend - which is not at all to the liking of the Flemish Green government party Agalev. Last week the greens stated that in their view there would be a problem if more weapons were being transported. During the weekend they obtained information that this happened, indeed. Agalev MPs came forward with the news that civil aircraft with ordnance on board were making stopovers at Ostend, that two ships were loaded with military equipment in the port of Antwerp, and that the American army had announced further weapons transport in April. Furthermore, the news was leaked last week that a secret agreement existed, which grants free transit for American military transport. For the hardliners in the party, there was obviously a problem. They demanded that Agalev withdraw from the government. The party executive does not think that is a good idea, with barely two weeks left in the current term of office. However, they are calling for an explanation from Prime Minister Guy Verhofstadt (FF).

WIM WINCKELMANS • HET VOLK • 24 MARCH

We want clarification as to the nature of the air transport,’ said Agalev parliamentary party leader Joos Wauters. ‘If this involves the carrying of military equipment, we have a problem.’ Agalev MP Peter Vanhoutte is going a step further. ‘If Agalev cannot stop the transport of weapons, yet remains in the government, I shall leave the party,’ he said. It has now been established that the aircraft that land at Ostend to refuel are indeed carrying military equipment or supplies. Most of the 230 night flights in February and at the beginning of March consisted of chartered civil aircraft flying to the Middle East. Yet strictly speaking these were not military transport flights. ‘Even the transportation of soldiers in civil aircraft appears not to constitute military transport,’ says federal minister Annelie Neyts [VLD]. These flights are operated on the basis of contracts between the American army and a private company. Therefore the rules of civil aviation apply.’ Neyts will point out to Transport Minister Isabelle Durant (Ecolo) that the American aircraft repeatedly violate the regulations at the Ostend airport. The question now is whether the secret agreement dating from 1971, which gives American military convoys free landing rights, is also applicable to these flights. There is considerable discord in the government between VLD, SPA and the Greens over this agreement.

BART DOBBELAERE • DE STANDAARD • 25 MARCH

Agalev’s party executive has decided not to withdraw from the government. However, the party is hardening its position. Agalev is asking clearly and unambiguously for the agreement with the USA to be terminated - even if the period of notice is six months. The party hopes that this could count as a signal to the Americans. The Greens point out that the agreement dates from 1971, so that the treaty was up for review in any case. The party feels that it has the backing of the French-speaking Parti Socialiste, which is also calling for the agreement to be terminated. Agalev also wants parliament to be given the opportunity to inspect the agreement. At the moment, only the Ministers for Foreign Affairs [Michel] and Defence [Flahaut] and the Prime Minister [Verhofstadt] know the real content of the agreement.

The PS, SPA and Ecolo also feel that the 1971 agreement, which dates from the Cold War, should be re-negotiated, or even that it should be terminated. The Liberals of VLD and the MR are not inclined to adopt such a muscular position on the issue as the Greens and Socialists. It is clear that termination of the 1971 agreements, or even their renegotiation, would lead to a serious incident with the USA. The country would also stand completely alone if this were to happen. France and Germany are not going that far. They do not want to terminate their transport agreements. Therefore, Premier Guy Verhofstadt cannot promise his coalition partners a termination of the agreements, although he is not completely shutting the door on the possibility. He has hinted that an updating of the old agreement ought to be possible.

Source: TiJD Graphics

Coalition votes 2003
The Belgian Genocide Act (against crimes against humanity), which dates from 1993, has already incurred the wrath of many an international senior-ranking politician. The last time this happened was when a number of Iraqis lodged a complaint against George Bush Senior, Colin Powell and general Schwarzkopf for the death of several hundred schoolchildren during a bombing raid on Baghdad, in the previous Gulf War. Just before the new gulf war started, the US Secretary of State Colin Powell called for the complaint to be withdrawn immediately. Previously a complaint against the Israeli Prime Minister Ariel Sharon had provoked fierce protest from the Israeli government. In all, some 35 complaints have been lodged with the Belgian judicial authorities against heads of state, heads of government, military men and industrialists from 22 different countries. Apart from Bush and Sharon, President Kagame of Rwanda, the former Chilean dictator Augusto Pinochet, president Rafsanjani of Iran, Yasser Arafat, Fidel Castro, the Burmese regime and Total-Rafsanjani of Iran, Yasser Arafat, Fidel Castro, the Burmese regime and Total-Fina-Elf and former Congolese minister Yerodia have also been targeted. When the president of the House Herman De-croo pointed out that the American Chamber of Commerce [Amcham] had advised a number of businessmen not to invest in Belgium as long as Belgium was not able to guarantee legal security, and Colin Powell had suggested that the act could result in the NATO headquarters having to leave Brussels, the government realised that it could no longer put off a drastic amendment of the act to which such objection has been raised. In order to get the adaptation voted on before the end of the legisatur, these had to be approved by the parliamentary committee on justice on 26 March. However, to this end the VLD had to submit to an amendment under which the tightening only applies to complaints lodged after 1 July 2002. The complaint against Ariel Sharon was submitted in July 2001. On 2 April the final vote in the Chambre is scheduled.
Lambermont agreement upheld in Court of Arbitration

ONE ARTICLE IS REMOVED FROM THE SECTION REGULATING THE STATE REFORM IN THE BRUSSELS REGION

In its ruling of 25 March, and much to the satisfaction of the ‘Purple-Green’ coalition, the Court of Arbitration upheld the Lambermont agreement on state reform. However, one article is removed from the section regulating the state reform in the Brussels Region. With this article, the majority wanted to increase the number of members of the Flemish Community Committee (Vlaamse Gemeenschapscommissie [VGC] - competent for education, culture and personal affairs) in the capital on the basis of the result of the elections to the Flemish Parliament (with a relatively smaller Blok representation) and not on the basis of the elections to the Brussels Parliament (Brussels Metropolitan Council). In so doing, the majority wanted to prevent the Vlaams Blok from paralysing the functioning of the Brussels Parliament due to a dominant position in the Dutch-speaking group in this parliament. After all, the Government of Brussels has to be given the green light by a majority in both the Dutch and French language groups in the parliament (FF).

BART EECHHOUT • DE MORGEN • 26 MARCH

The Lambermont state reform is the community tailpiece of this period of office. The reform contains a major refocusing of the Communities and the regionalisation of the local government and provinces act. According to the opposition parties, Lambermont is unconstitutional because an amendment to the constitution is required for the transfer of the local government act to the regions, and the Verhofstadt government has resorted to special laws out of sheer necessity. However, the Court of Arbitration has not followed this reasoning. The power over the local government act therefore remains within the regions and the Government of Flanders can continue to work on its own revamped local government decree. However, Article 38 of the Lambermont Act, which introduced an anti-blocking system designed to prevent the Vlaams Blok form sabotaging the formation of a Government in Brussels, has been annulled. In order to prevent a possible blocking majority of Vlaams Blok members in the Flemish language group, Lambermont proposed that approval by a majority in the VGC could suffice. This VGC would then be supplemented by five extra mandates on the basis of the distribution of seats in the Flemish Region. The aim was thereby to dilute somewhat the stronger presence of the Blok in Brussels. The Court of Arbitration has now ruled that this arrangement is unconstitutional, because a competence of the Brussels regional council is transferred to the VGC. The Flemish-radical party N-VA, which instituted the referral to the VGC. The Flemish-radical party N-VA, which instituted the referral to the VGC. The Flemish-radical party N-VA, which instituted the referral to the VGC. The Flemish-radical party N-VA, which instituted the referral to the VGC. The Flemish-radical party N-VA, which instituted the referral to the VGC. The Flemish-radical party N-VA, which instituted the referral to the VGC. The Flemish-radical party N-VA, which instituted the referral to the VGC. The Flemish-radical party N-VA, which instituted the referral to the VGC.

WWW.BRUXELLES.IRISNET.BE

Gabriëls opens first House of Flemish Economy

THE NEW BODY INCORPORATES A WHOLE RANGE OF DEPARTMENTS AND SERVICES

Flemish Economic Affairs Minister, Jaak Gabriëls (VLD), officially opened the first House for Flemish Economy (Huis van de Vlaamse Economie) in Ghent on 26 March. Gabriëls wanted to start up a House of this kind in every province. The idea is that the House should become a point of contact with the Flemish administration for people starting up a business and established entrepreneurs, who will be able to go there for advice and guidance. However, the draft decree for the establishment of the Houses still has to be approved and the premises of the Ghent House are a long way from being brought into use. Indeed, the conversions being made to the building in which the House is located are still in full swing (FF).

GAZET VAN ANTWERPEN • 27 MARCH

The new body incorporates a whole range of departments and Flemish services that had hitherto been fragmented here and there. These include the regional branch offices of the Flanders Export Promotion Agency (Export Vlaanderen), the Regional Development Companies (GOM) and the Flemish business advice and design departments. ‘This centre is part and parcel of the ambitious ‘enterprise’ action plan that I presented last year,’ said Minister Gabriëls, outlining the project’s background. ‘Barely 3% of Flemings start up their own business these days, so we felt it was extremely important to promote entrepreneurship. This centre should grow into an accessible point of contact where entrepreneurs can obtain a whole range of basic advice. The account management is also new: an entrepreneur can contact a single account manager, who will then follow and keep close track of his file.’

WWW.VLAANDEREN.BE
WWW.EXPORTVLAANDEREN.BE

POLL

WHO MUST BE THE NEXT MAYOR OF ANTWERP?

DUET JANSSENS VERSUS OTHER CANDIDATE

| WHO MUST BE THE NEXT MAYOR OF ANTWERP? | JANSSENS [65%] | DEWINTER [28%] |
| PATRICK JANSSENS [SP.A] | 30% | JANSSENS [55%] |
| PHILIP DEWININTER [VLAAMS BLOK] | 14% | COVELIERS [34%] |
| HUGO COVELIERS [VLD] | 10% | |
| LEONA DETIEGE [SP.A] | 6% | |
| MARC VAN PEEL [CD&V] | 2% | |
| LEO DELWAIDE [VLD] | 2% | |
| LUDO VAN CAMPENHOUT [VLD] | 1% | JANSSENS [59%] |
| NO OPINION | 29% | VAN CAMPENHOUT [28%] |

SOURCE: DE MORGEN

focus on FLANDERS • 22 March - 28 March 2003 • Number 12
**Flemish Government and social partners conclude agreement**

On 21 March the Government of Flanders and the two sides of industry concluded a definitive employment agreement for 2003 and 2004, in which an attempt has been made to strive for a balance between employer-friendly and employee-friendly measures. Some Flemish employers had hitherto been obstructive, but it was possible to bring them round with an abolition of the regional part of the advance levy on income derived from real estate in 2004. In the original agreement concluded by the social partners back on 22 January, provision was made for this levy to be abolished from 2003, but for the Government of Flanders this proved to be unfeasible for financial and a number of practical reasons. The easing of the tax and premium burden ranges from around EUR 100 for self-employed persons to more than half a million euros for the largest industrial plants. Outside the framework of the agreement, the Minister-President of the Government of Flanders Patrick Dewael (VLD) also wants to find a solution for the non-deductibility of the sewage treatment taxes for companies (FF).

**ELLEN CLEEREN • DE FINANCIEL-ECONOMISCHE TIJD • 22 MARCH**

The Government of Flanders is earmarking EUR 100 million for the agreement. EUR 25 million is being booked back on 22 January, provision was made for this levy to be abolished from 2003, but for the Government of Flanders this proved to be unfeasible for financial and a number of practical reasons. The easing of the tax and premium burden ranges from around EUR 100 for self-employed persons to more than half a million euros for the largest industrial plants. Outside the framework of the agreement, the Minister-President of the Government of Flanders Patrick Dewael (VLD) also wants to find a solution for the non-deductibility of the sewage treatment taxes for companies (FF).

The Flemish Minister for Employment Renaat Landuyt (SPA) said that the training vouchers would be available from September. Moreover, provision is being made for 1,400 additional places in day nurseries. Outside the framework of the employment agreement, the employers had also urged for compensation for the sewage treatment taxes in all economic sectors. At the moment compensation is only granted to the laundry and textile sector. In this respect, Dewael only undertook to sound out the possibilities in the next budgetary audit and to consult with the federal government. ‘It makes no sense,’ said Dewael, ‘for the Government of Flanders to compensate for what the federal government takes off.’

WWW.VLAANDEREN.BE

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**Cut in electricity bills for large companies**

From 1 April the Commission for the Regulation of the Electricity and Gas Sector (CREG) is cutting the prices for the conveyance of electricity through the Belgian high-tension network by 21 to 33%, depending on the tension. The Commission is also cutting the prices for the support services that can be charged by Elia, the manager of the Belgian high-tension network and a subsidiary company of Electrabel. That is good news for the major industrial consumers. For a company using 100 million kWh per year, a cut in the conveyance price by 1 euro-cent results in a saving of EUR 1 million, according to De Financieel-Economische Tijd (22 March). For the smaller electricity consumers, the cut in the conveyance prices is less visible than it is for the major users. For them, a cut in the distribution price is important, and that will be on the CREG’s agenda at the end of April. The distribution network managers have already submitted their files to the CREG. CREG chairman Hugo Camps attributes the high electricity prices in Belgium to the high level of VAT on electricity, the veiled levies to the benefit of the municipalities in the electricity prices, the high wage costs in the sector and Electrabel’s overly large equity capital.

The Belgian non-ferrous producer Umicore and the Febeliec, the federation of major industrial consumers, have called the CREG’s initiative commendable. However, quoted in De Standaard (27 March), they point out that the initiative does not have much of an impact on the cost price of electricity, since no separate costs for transmission of electricity can be identified in the all-in bills. Therefore, according to Febeliec, it is primarily Electrabel itself that is benefiting from the fall in transmission costs. Electrabel controls 90% of the Belgian power stations and the supply of electricity from abroad is a laborious business.

WWW.ELECTRABEL.BE
WWW.CREG.BE
Employers and trade unions in the textile sector have reached an agreement

Strike action affected the textile sector from Monday 24 March to Wednesday 26 March. Thirty thousand employees, supported by the trade unions, have downed tools at large textile companies such as Beaulieu, Lano, Ontex, De Witte, Lietaer, Prado, Bic, Domo, Sioen and Balta. The textile workers were asking for a sizeable pay rise over and above the index rate. On top of that they were calling for the abolition of the ‘carenzdagen’ (‘waiting days’ - the first sick day which is not paid to blue-collar workers but is paid to white-collar workers), and a more flexible application of the time credit. The sectoral association of textile managers Febeltex considers the employers’ demands to be far too expensive. As they see it, the demands amount to a pay rise of more than 9%, whilst the orientative pay rise in the inter-professional agreement is only 5.4%. Febeltex did not want to go above that. The employers’ organisation fears that with its high wages, the Belgian textile sector will be pricing itself still further out of the world market, with the result that more and more activities will have to be ‘relocated’ to low-wage countries. They also feared that with extrusion companies and spinning mills being brought to a standstill, the strike would do enormous damage to the sector, since the process of starting up the machines again in such companies takes a great deal of time and causes financial loss. An agreement was reached on 26 March, after three days of strike action (FF).

Johan Rasking • De Standaard • 25 March

The fierce conflict over the collective labour agreement in the textile sector is in stark contrast to the at times innovative manner with which trade unions and employers have made agreements on pay and working conditions for the coming two years in three other branches of industry (chemicals, wood and metal). The reason is the textile trade unions’ urge to create a distinctive profile, the stubbornness of the employers’ federation Febeltex and the mutual distrust. The explanation for the extremely hefty pay demand is perhaps to be found in the stubborn attitude of the textile employers in other sensitive matters, such as the improvement of the social statute of the 40,000 textile workers. Febeltex wants to hear nothing of an abolition of the so-called carensdagen (‘waiting days’). No abolition of the waiting day, so no agreements on flexibility either, comes the trade unions’ riposte. The trench warfare in the textile sector contrasts markedly with the successful collective labour agreement talks in the chemicals, wood and metal sectors. In the three cases there have been pay agreements within the wage norm of 5.4%, says Febeltex. Correct. But three comments need to be made in this respect:

One: in the chemicals sector, it is traditional for agreements to be made in the large companies over and above the minimum increase provided for in the sector’s collective labour agreement. Moreover, the unions have been charmed by the gradual abolition of the ‘waiting days’ and the extension of the periods of notice.

Two: in the metal sector, the 150,000 workers can also boast the abolition of the ‘waiting days’, in exchange the pay rise is of innovative elaboration. In 2003 everything remains limited to the indexing, which leaves the companies room for a real wage increase of 1 to 1.3% in 2004. On top of that comes a sectoral increase of 1% on 1 October 2004, i.e., at the end of the term covered by the collective labour agreement. But if the indexing over the whole of the period 2003-2004 is higher than the estimated 3.1%, that 1% will be cut, so that the wage norm is not exceeded: an all-in formula, as it were.

Three: in the smaller wood sector (22,000 workers), the wage costs rise by barely 4%. The ‘waiting day’ is being retained. But the unions have opted for greater purchasing power in the longer term, via the fiscally attractive formulas of pension savings and a hospitalisation insurance policy. That fringe benefit is still set aside for only a handful of workers.

René de Witte • De Financieel-Economische Tijd • 28 March

Employers and trade unions in the textile sector have finally reached an agreement on a collective labour agreement for 2003-2004. According to Febeltex, the employers went as far as a pay rise of 6%: two times a 2% index leap, plus a further 2% increase on top of that. According to the trade unions the wage increase is 4.63%. The wage increase consists of two index leaps, plus an increase in the wage-scale and actual remuneration of EUR 0.15 from 1 January 2004. In October, November and December 2003 a luncheon voucher will be granted for every day worked. From 1 April 2004 onwards one waiting day (carenzdag) per calendar year will be scrapped – and therefore paid – provided that the employee concerned has completed five years’ uninterrupted service with the company. The time-credit system is being made more flexible, so that from now on a departure can be made from the rule that a maximum of five percent of the staff is eligible.

STM acquires Proton World

FF Editor

Proton World, a spin-off of the Belgian concern Banksys, which developed the electronic wallet Proton in 1995, has changed owner again. The Franco-Italian manufacturer of semiconductors STMicroelectronics (STM), specialised in integrated circuits for printed circuit boards, has acquired Proton World from the Australian technology group ERG, which had bought out the other Proton shareholders in 2001, and had thus acquired full control. Today ERG is wrestling with cash problems and had therefore put Proton in the shop-window again. STM paid ‘only’ EUR 37 million in cash for the takeover, but on top of this ERG has secured a twenty-year licence on the Proton technology, and can sell smart cards containing an STM chip for ten years. Proton World is the world leader in transactions using an ‘electronic wallet’. In Belgium, the use of a Proton card to pay for goods in stores has become common practice, and the introduction of the euro gave the practice an extra boost. One hundred and thirty people are employed at Proton World.

www.protonworld.com
Concentra sells a 49% stake in Metro to Rossel

The listed media group Concentra, publisher of Het Belang van Limburg and Gazet van Antwerpen, posted a net loss of EUR 21.11 million with a turnover of EUR 172 million (down 9%). This loss is chiefly attributable to the loss in value of its shares in the network protector Ubizen. In 2001 Concentra ranged its 25% stake of Ubizen in the separate company Cobra, which is wholly owned by the Baert family (also the founder and principal shareholder of Concentra). Concentra extended a loan of EUR 40 million to Cobra, for which Ubizen shares served as security. Cobra was to repay EUR 8 million every year. This year the company was no longer able to fulfil this obligation, so the loan was rescheduled to 2006. Ubizen shares are currently worth only EUR 1.45. On account of the sharp fall in the value of Ubizen shares, Concentra was forced to book a major decrease in value on this loan. When Concentra merged with the Collin family’s holding company Imperial Invest in 2000, the share was still valued at EUR 42.39. The Ubizen shares and the sale of KB-Lux shares, among others, from the Imperial portfolio, have led to a spirited quarrel raging between the Baert and Collin families of late. In addition, Concentra has also had to book extraordinary charges for the dissolution of the printing-business joint venture Mercator Printing Group, which the company had set up with Roularta and Mercator. The printer’s department Concentra Grafik therefore closed with a loss. The media division Concentra Media posted a negligible net profit of EUR 49,000. The income from print media (Gazet van Antwerpen and Het Belang van Limburg) held their ground, despite a falling newspaper market. The free paper Metro, which is mainly distributed in railway and metro stations, with a circulation of 220,000 copies, incurred a loss of EUR 3.7 million on a turnover of EUR 4.1 million in advertising revenue. Metro was launched in 2000 by Roularta, NPM and Concentra, but both Roularta and NPM withdrew from the project in 2001 because it was too loss-making. At the presentation of its annual results, Concentra announced that the French-language newspaper group Rossel was acquiring a 49% stake in Mass Transit Media, the publisher of Metro. The two publishers are shaking hands with a view to consolidating the national position of the free paper.

WWW.CONCENTRA.BE

Roularta books net profit in 2002

The listed media company Roularta booked a net profit of EUR 2.5 million in 2002, coming on the heels of a EUR 6.78 million loss in 2001. Roularta was forced to lose EUR 5.4 million in earnings as a result of the slackening job-advertisement market. But that was amply offset by lower paper prices and increased advertising revenue from the commercial television channels (VTM, Kanaal 2 and Jim-TV). For the first time a loss has not been recorded for the regional television stations (Focus, Ring-TV and WTV), which have long been a problem child of the group. Only the business channel Kanaal Z is failing to pull through and the losses continue to pile up (EUR 3 million in 2002). Turnover at Roularta dropped by 3.3% to EUR 423.9 million.

WWW.ROULARTA.BE

Flemish war reporting in Iraq

At the beginning of last week, insurance companies decided to increase the premium for a trip to Iraq to no less than EUR 12,500 a day. The premium for neighbouring countries such as Jordan (a safe country) was raised to EUR 1,000 a day. Needless to say it was mainly journalists who were affected by the measures. The consequences for Belgian reporting in Iraq have been dramatic. Not a single medium could permit itself to continue reporting on the new Gulf War from within Iraq (FF).

DIRK DRAULANS • KNACK • 26 MARCH

It goes without saying that war reporting implies greater risks than covering a European summit meeting in Brussels. However, the risks should not be over-estimated, either. In spite of this, insurance companies are even refusing to accept any proposals to relieve employers of all responsibility for the extra risks attached to reporting from Iraq, by means of a document signed by a journalist. Such a document would not guarantee that the insurers would never have to pay up. The consequences are now well known. Plans made by Knack to travel to Baghdad had to be dropped in extremis. The news service of the commercial television channel VTM was forced to bring Luc De Smet back from Baghdad. The morning after his arrival in Baghdad, Rudi Vranckx, a member of the news team of the VRT public broadcasting corporation, learnt that he had to leave again. The frustration was more than apparent on his face and in his words, when, on subsequent days, he reported from Jordan and Kuwait ‘as an ordinary mortal’, on what he, like everyone else, had seen on television. The insurance companies’ measures demoted Vranckx and other war correspondents to the level of radio journalist Jef Lambrecht (Radio 1, public
Diary

MUSIC, DANCE, THEATRE

• 1 and 2 April: Paul Mac Cartney, Sportpaleis, Antwerp, info: 0900/260.60
• 2 April: Florestian Trio with Mendolsson, Weir and Schumann, De Singel, Antwerp, info: 03/248.28.28 www.desingel.be
• 2 April: Cello suites by Benjamin Britten, Pieter Wispelwey, De Bijloke, Ghent, info: 09/269.92.92 www.debijloke.be
• 2 April: Blandine Verlet (harpsichord) with work by Bach and Froberger, PSK, Brussels, info: www.pskpba.be
• 2 and 3 April: Antigone by musical theatre company Transparent, Baroque opera by Tomaso Traetta conducted by Paul Dombrecht, director Gerardijn Rijnders, De Singel, Antwerp, info: 03/248.28.28 www.desingel.be
• 5 April: James Taylor, PSK, Brussels, info: 02/507.82.00 www.pskpba.be
• 5 April: Full cycle, Ancienne Belgique, Brussels, info: 02/548.24.24 www.abconcerts.be
• 7 April: Ed Harcourt, Ancienne Belgique, Brussels, info: 02/548.24.24 www.abconcerts.be
• 8 April: Interpol, Ancienne Belgique, Brussels, info: 02/548.24.24 www.abconcerts.be
• 9 April: Steve Earle, Ancienne Belgique, Brussels, info: 02/548.24.24 www.abconcerts.be
• 6 April: National Orchestra of Belgium conducted by Theodore Guichbauser with work by Ravel, Saint-Saëns and Dukas, PSK, Brussels, info: www.pskpba.be
• 8 April: La Fénice conducted by Jean Tubery, PSK, Brussels, info: www.pskpba.be
• 2 and 11 to 22 April: Ariodante by GF Haendel, conductor Christoph Poppen, Director: David Alden, Flanders Opera, Ghent (2 April) and Antwerp, info: www.vlaesopera.be
• 2 April: Brad Mehldau Trio, Concertgebouw Bruges, info: 070/22.33.02 www.concertgebouw.be

EXPO

• From 22 March to 17 January: Jacques Brel, ‘The right to dream’, exhibition, Schildknaapstraat 50, Brussels; reservation required, info: www.jacquesbrel.be 02/511.10.20
• Until 31 August: The big Sexperimenter, scientific exhibition, Technopolis, Mechelen, info: 015/84.30.00
• Until 29 June: Music Planet; one century of pop music in an exhibition, Brewery Belle Vue, Molenbeek, info: www.euroculture.be 02/513/29/84
• Until 6 April: Maria Magdalena, sinner from the Middle Ages until today, exhibition, Museum of Fine Arts, Ghent, info: 09/222.17.03
• Until 13 April: Jacques Charlier and Leo Copers, exhibitions, SMAK, Ghent, info: 09/222.17.03 www.smak.be

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