

Beat: Politics

Former Belgian prime minister Jean-Luc Dehaene dead at 73

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USPA News - Former Belgian Prime Minister Jean-Luc Dehaene, the Christian Democrat who led his nation during the 1990s and played a prominent role in the early years of the European Union (EU), died Thursday after becoming unwell during a vacation in France, officials said. He was 73. Senator Wouter Beke, the leader of the Christian Democratic and Flemish (CD&V) party, said Dehaene died unexpectedly while vacationing with his wife and friends in Briec in northwestern France.

Beke had initially said the former prime minister died after a fall, but this appeared to be inaccurate. Belgian newspaper De Standaard reported that Dehaene was visiting a cookie factory in Briec on Thursday when he suddenly became unwell. "He was worn-out and became unwell shortly after the start of his visit," Marc Berger, the owner of the factory, told the newspaper. An ambulance was called but Dehaene was dead upon arrival at the hospital. The cause of Dehaene's death remained unclear on late Thursday, though the politician recently underwent surgery for pancreatic cancer. Prime Minister Elio Di Rupo said he learned of the news with "immense sadness" and hailed Dehaene as an extraordinary statesman, an experienced guide and a reference for many politicians. "Jean-Luc Dehaene has proven exceptional services for Belgium, both socio-economically and institutionally," Di Rupo said. "He also had a clear vision for a stronger Europe that is closer to its citizens." CD&V said it had decided to cancel all campaign activities until Sunday night in the wake of Dehaene's death. Marianne Thyssen, who is a member of the European Parliament for CD&V, said Dehaene was unique as both a person and politician. "He was the architect of various state reforms, led our country through economic and political crises, formed governments in difficult circumstances, reorganized government finances and led our country to the euro, to speak of some of his achievements," she said. After serving as prime minister for two terms, during which he was nicknamed "The Plumber" or "The Minesweeper," Dehaene devoted himself to Europe. "As underchairman of the European convention he wrote for the future of Europe. Also in the European Parliament he distinguished himself with his broad view on Europe," Thyssen added. Dehaene is survived by his wife Celie Verbeke and four children.

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United Press Association, Inc.
3651 Lindell Road, Suite D168
Las Vegas, NV 89103, USA
(702) 943.0321 Local
(702) 943.0233 Facsimile
info@unitedpressassociation.org
info@gna24.com
www.gna24.com