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Contact

Melle van Dijk

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Date August 14, 2018

Re Your letter on behalf of Honorary Consuls worldwide

Our reference

BZ.2018-51966

Dear Mr Van Maanen,

Thank you for your letter to Mr Blok and your obvious passion for your role as honorary consul. I wholeheartedly agree that honorary consuls play an invaluable role in serving the interests of the Netherlands and Dutch citizens abroad, often in challenging settings. You rightly describe them as our country's eyes and ears abroad, particularly in areas where we might not have an embassy or consulate-general. The Conference of Honorary Consuls is the pre-eminent forum for assembling the honorary consuls' collective knowledge and experience, and for shining a well-deserved spotlight on their important work. Rest assured that the ministry remains firmly committed to maintaining the conditions necessary for the honorary consuls to perform their important duties.

The issues raised in your letter show your concern regarding the changing responsibilities of honorary consuls, the official rules governing their activities, and their responsibilities towards the media. I will address these issues one by one below.

Responsibilities

In your letter you express your disappointment about several changes to your responsibilities. I can assure you that these changes were not made lightly; they were the result of careful deliberation and various legal considerations.

More specifically, you express disappointment about the reduced role of honorary consuls in the passport application and renewal process. There are strict statutory provisions with regard to issuing passports and establishing children's identity. Unfortunately, experience has shown that the involvement of honorary consuls in these areas has not always produced the desired results. As I said, the decision to cut back their role in this area was taken with careful consideration. The longer distances that some Dutch nationals must travel in order to apply for a passport or renew an existing one is offset by several mitigating measures, such as the passport's longer period of validity and the option for Dutch nationals living abroad to apply for a passport in the Netherlands.

Furthermore, you state that the Ministry of Foreign Affairs does not avail itself of the honorary consuls' local knowledge when drafting its foreign travel advice. The Consular Affairs and Visa Policy Department is responsible for issuing travel advice, and it does so with the greatest possible care. The embassy responsible for the country concerned is always involved in this process, and it frequently relies on the specific knowledge of honorary consuls within the area it serves. The embassy also draws on a variety of other sources, such as European and

international partners, intelligence services, security companies and the travel industry.

Provisions concerning honorary consuls

As with any other civil servant, the position of Honorary Consul is not formally bound by age restrictions. However, upon reaching the legal retirement age, it is common for civil servants to reflect on the future of their appointment.

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Pursuant to article 133, paragraph 1 of the Foreign Service Regulations (RDBZ) , honorary consuls are appointed for a maximum of five years. An honorary consul's appointment ends automatically on expiry of this period. At the ambassador's request and in the interest of the ministry, the term can be extended for a period of up to five years. Before making such a request, the ambassador establishes whether there is good reason to maintain that particular consulate.

Honorary consuls have annual interviews with the ambassador to discuss their work over the past year, the work they will be doing in the year ahead and their general performance. In the honorary consul's fifth year in office, the ambassador makes a recommendation on whether or not to extend the appointment, based in part on these annual interviews.

With regard to compensation for costs, including travel costs, each honorary consul receives a flat-rate allowance, in some cases supplemented by an additional results-based allowance and/or a budget-based allowance. In practice, incidental travel costs are often reimbursed on the basis of the costs that are actually incurred.

Media contacts

The Dutch Ministry of Foreign Affairs is an outward-oriented organisation, and as its officials, honorary consuls enjoy freedom of speech like anyone else. This right is enshrined in the Constitution, though it is also subject to certain restrictions. As government officials, honorary consuls sometimes have to reconcile their freedom of speech with their duty of confidentiality as laid down in the oath or affirmation taken upon their appointment. When in doubt, they are asked to contact the Communications Department about the appropriate course of action. If approached by the media in their capacity as a ministry official, honorary consuls should always refer journalists to the Communications Department. This is standard policy for all ministry officials.

In conclusion, let me reiterate my sincere appreciation for the important work being done by honorary consuls all around the world. The conversations I had at the Conference of Honorary Consuls impressed on me the notion that we can do more to take advantage of this network's potential. As an organisation, we are working towards that end. On 15 June 2018, the ministry's Senior Management Board concluded that more could be done to streamline the relationship between embassies and the honorary consuls who work in the area they serve, possibly by explicitly addressing the head of mission's responsibilities vis-à-vis the honorary consul in the latter's introductory brief and by scheduling regular contact between the two. I trust that the types of day-to-day issues that may arise in the course of an honorary consul's duties can be resolved in consultation between the embassy and the honorary consul in question. In the unlikely event that this is not the case, they are advised to contact their regional director.

Please feel free to forward this letter to those colleagues who have endorsed or otherwise supported your letter of 30 July.

Yours sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'P. Kleiweg de Zwaan', with a long horizontal line extending to the right.

Pieter-Jan Kleiweg de Zwaan
Deputy Director-General Political Affairs
for the Minister of Foreign Affairs

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