

To: The Minister of Foreign Affairs

The Hague

The Netherlands

Dear Minister Blok,

30<sup>th</sup> of July 2018

During the last CHC2018, the Conference of Honorary Consuls in The Hague, last April, you met with many of us. We were able to share ideas and exchange experience. It was said and repeated: "The Honorary Consuls are "the eyes and ears" of The Netherlands in the countries we work." But that is often theory. In practice, the responsibilities of the Honorary Consuls have been reduced and sometimes even marginalized over the past decade. Our often unique positions in our countries are not always explored to the best and sometimes even ignored. There are possibilities where the position of the Honorary Consul can be used better to serve the Netherlands, the Netherlands citizens living in our countries and also serve better the countries we live in. We like to mention a few.

- 1) The Honorary Consuls of The Netherlands in the whole world, are regularly confronted by angry Netherlands citizens who face high costs for obtaining a new passport. A recent article in "de Volkskrant" and also earlier publications mentioned that some Netherlands citizens have to spent hundreds or even thousands of Euros in travel and hotel costs to reach the nearest embassy with the right facilities. These citizens can be greatly helped if the Ministry of Foreign Affairs uses existing facilities and people it has at its disposal: the Honorary Consul. The Honorary Consuls are civil servants appointed by the King and sworn in by the ambassador and should be authorized to execute responsible duties. The reason for the long travel are the biometrics that are incorporated in the passports. The principle biometrics are the fingerprints. The requests of Honorary Consuls to make fingerprint scanners available to them was denied by the ministry for the following reasons: Honorary Consuls are not authorized to fingerprint people, they are not trained to use the scanner and also the cost of the scanner (with its software) was an argument. Our counter arguments are the following: simply authorize the Honorary Consul (King appointed civil servant!), the use of the scanner is simple and easy and less complicated than a coffee machine and the cost of the scanner has gone down to a few hundred Euros. This technology is even incorporated in every modern cellphone, free of charge! So, what is the problem? It is so easy to increase the number of places where fingerprint scanners are available from the actual 120 to 370 places.

- 2) The Honorary Consul is not authorized to identify people. This matters especially with young children. We often know the parents of these children and also the children themselves for many years. Again, in the case of a new passport, parents and children have to travel to the nearest embassy (at high costs) to be "identified". As the (baby) photograph in the passport is usually unrecognizable, the lack of a signature (of course!) and no finger prints were taken (children under the age of 12 are not fingerprinted), this identification is done on the basis of a quick chat and "facial characteristics", for which only one parent has to be present with the child! These high travel costs for parents and children (again see "de Volkskrant") can be saved if the word and signature of the Honorary Consul are trusted. This is not the case. Why? To us it seems that our signature (oath taken and sworn in by the ambassador) is more reliable than a "facial characteristics identification".
- 3) The travel advice for our countries is not based on reports or experience-in-the-field of the Honorary Consul. In fact, the Honorary Consul has no influence at all over the contents of the travel advice. We think (but are not sure) that the travel advices are a concoction of what the embassy and the desk officer in The Hague, THINKS what the situation is in our country and this desk officer (who may never have visited our country) often (partly) copies from other countries that issue travel advices (European, American, etc.). Fake news may also play a role here. We are faced with travelers who accuse us about supplying them with inaccurate and wrong information. Sometimes we are even confronted with absolute nonsense in our travel advice. We think that the Netherlands tax payer has a right to an up-to-date and 100% correct travel advice. Insurance companies, airlines, travel agents, etc. all take the advice very seriously and wrong changes to the advice can have unwanted and unpleasant consequences for a traveler. Calls for changes to the travel advice by Honorary Consuls are not listened to and sometimes mistakes take a year to correct. May we suggest that the European Union publishes a travel advice, valid for all European Union citizens and companies?
- 4) We would like to call to an end of the age discrimination against Honorary Consuls. The "rule" of the ministry is that Honorary Consuls are sacked at the age of 70 is no longer of today. The ministry unofficially confirmed this: at the CHC2018 conference in The Hague, several Honorary Consuls had passed the 70 years limit by far. Recently a new Honorary Consul was appointed in the USA. He was 71 at the day he was sworn in! Today, 70 is the new 60. We like to be judged on the basis of our work for the Kingdom of the Netherlands and NOT on the basis of a date on the calendar.

- 5) Honorary Consuls, when traveling on official duty, should be subject to the same travel allowance as diplomats and other civil servants. As this is not the case, unpleasant situations and irritation has arisen in the past. In many countries, especially "non embassy" countries, the Honorary Consul is faced with extra office costs for administration that is usually dealt with by the Embassy. These Consulates should be compensated for these costs.
  
- 6) Honorary Consuls are not allowed to have contacts with the local or international press (including The Netherlands) and we are supposed to always refer journalists to the Embassy (which often again depends on information from us!). We are not allowed to publish anything that is not pre-seen by the Ministry. We find this a limitation to our freedom of speech.

The question may come up of why none of these topics were raised at the CHC2018 in April in The Hague? Although the conference was perfectly organized (thanks to your fantastic CHC2018 team) many of us had the feeling that the ministry was talking TO us and not WITH us. We believe that we need an independent and confidential talking point outside our embassies where we can present our ideas and grievances, our complaints and comments, which are not picked up by our embassies. Often, we find that the embassy is an unpassable hurdle, where rules are rules which must be obeyed and cannot be changed. Even if those rules are poorly thought of and have unnecessarily negative consequences for the Netherlands citizens we try to serve.

We strongly believe that the institute of Honorary Consul is not only for the Ministry of Foreign Affairs but is also there to really SERVE the Netherlands citizens resident in our region or country and visitors. To achieve this, we invite you to start the dialogue at all levels, inside and outside the ministry, to enable us to perform at our best!

With kind regards and the best wishes for your work.

The 250 Netherlands Honorary Consuls in the world.