

Unofficial translation of letter sent by the Dutch Ministry of Foreign affairs in response to the Dutch parliament motion on closure of the Eritrean embassy

The official document (Dutch) can be found here:

<https://www.rijksoverheid.nl/documenten/kamerstukken/2018/01/17/kamerbrief-met-reactie-op-motie-over-sluiten-eritrese-ambassade>

To the Chair of the Second Chamber of the States General

Date: 17 January 2018

Concerning: Motion of Sjoerdsma and Azmani (kst. 22831-132) about closing the Eritrean embassy

Dear Chair,

With this letter, the Cabinet informs your Chamber about the subsequent steps taken in response to the motion of members Sjoerdsma and Azmani (kst. 22831-132) in which the ‘government is requested to close the Eritrean embassy’.

The Cabinet has noted with concern the broadcast of Argos on Saturday 23 December. The broadcast confirms the current picture of the way in which the Eritrean community has to pay the diaspora tax to gain access to consular services from the Eritrean embassy office in The Hague. On 28 December 2017, the Eritrean ambassador in Brussels (co-accredited in the Netherlands) was summoned. In the talks with the ambassador, the great concerns of the Netherlands about the current practices around the collection of the diaspora tax in the Netherlands have again been explicitly conveyed.

Based on this meeting and earlier talks with the Eritrean authorities, the Cabinet concludes that there is no understanding from the Eritrean side about the great political and societal resistance in the Netherlands towards the way in which the diaspora tax is collected, and also that there is no willingness on the Eritrean side to conform to this.

For that reason, partly in light of the continuing indications that intimidation and coercion take place in relation to the collection of the diaspora tax and the resulting societal and political unrest, the Cabinet is obliged to give a powerful diplomatic signal to the Eritrean authorities. By doing so, the Cabinet wants to make clear that the Netherlands does not accept these undesirable practices.

At the same time, the Cabinet recognises that no judge has as yet recorded proof of wrongful or punishable offenses by the Eritrean embassy office in The Hague. If the Public Prosecutor receives indications of possible punishable offenses, it will investigate these for leads for further criminal investigation and could instigate prosecution.

Considering the above, the Cabinet has decided to declare the chargé d'affaires of the Eritrean embassy office in The Hague *persona non grata* and has demanded his departure. The Eritrean ambassador was summoned on Tuesday 16 January to receive the *note verbale* containing this decision.

In the diplomatic world, a declaration of *persona non grata* counts as a very severe measure. The Netherlands rarely uses this measure and has never before closed an embassy (office) in the Netherlands unilaterally. The Netherlands understands that this measure is highly exceptional, which is intended as a signal to the Eritrean authorities.

The Cabinet has not decided to close the embassy office in The Hague. If the embassy office would be closed, the bilateral relations with Eritrea would be damaged to such an extent that adequate representation, for example in the area of migration, human rights and consular affairs and missions, would be virtually impossible. In addition, it was considered during the decision making process that the Eritrean community in the Netherlands benefits from nearby access to consular services. It would experience great practical hinderance of the closing, in which case the journey to Brussels has to be made for every consular service.

In order to reach a sustainable solution for the circumstances around the collection of the Eritrean diaspora tax, hard diplomatic measures alone will not suffice and it remains, among other things, crucial that police reports about punishable facts are filed.

The Minister of Foreign Affairs,

Halbe Zijlstra