

MANAGEMENT RESPONSE to the report *Racism at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs – an exploratory study*

12 December 2022

Inspired in part by the Black Lives Matter movement, the Senior Management Board decided to investigate what forms of racism exist within our organisation. To that end, we commissioned an exploratory study. The report of findings describes the nature of racism within the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (BZ), identifies patterns of racism and presents recommendations. It contains quotes from in-depth interviews that vividly illuminate the different ways in which racism manifests itself and in what ways staff members experience it. The report contains hard-hitting conclusions and painful examples.

The findings of the report affect us deeply. It is unacceptable what staff members have endured, what has been said and how this has made them feel. We are sorry that we have not been able to provide a working environment in which there is no place for such behaviour. On behalf of the board, I apologise for that failure. It in no way reflects our organisation's commitment to a safe and supportive working environment in The Hague and at the missions. Racism is unacceptable and has no place in our organisation. We are committed to ensuring that every member of staff of our ministry is respected and valued. In our organisation, core values and standards such as equal treatment, non-discrimination and respect must be upheld and violations must not be tolerated. Given that all forms of discrimination are prohibited by law and that the ministry calls for social justice around the world, it is all the more egregious that racism occurs in our organisation. In that light, too, we will do everything in our power to eradicate racism from our own organisation.

We are very grateful that members of staff were willing to participate in the study because we realise that it cannot have been easy for them to talk about their experiences. I want to assure everyone who experiences or has experienced racism that we stand with them and we support them. We are ashamed that in the past you did not receive the support you deserved.

We are going to fundamentally strengthen our organisation in order to prevent and fight racism. We are certain that the vast majority of staff worldwide condemn racism and are as firmly committed as we are to taking action to prevent and combat it. This is in keeping with our broader task and goal of being a diverse and inclusive organisation in which the composition of our staff is a reflection of society, and everyone is equal and is able to maximise their potential. We accept the recommendations presented in the report. A project group led by the deputy secretary-general will coordinate the work, building on the steps we have already taken in recent weeks and months and making use of expert advice. The focus will be on improving prevention efforts, responding better to incidents and making institutional changes. Our ambition is to act quickly and take major steps, but we know that tackling a cultural problem takes time. The special advisers for diversity and inclusion are members of the project group.

The follow-up to the report will proceed along three tracks, and where possible will of course dovetail with the government-wide approach to tackling discrimination and racism, which includes the Central Government Code of Conduct on Integrity.

1.

Firstly, we will raise awareness and foster broad recognition of the problem, and initiate a fundamental cultural change. The aim of this is to remove barriers to discussing racism, eradicate racism and prevent both deliberate and unintentional racist behaviour by staff.

This starts at the top:

- We communicate much more actively that there is no place for racism or other forms of exclusion and discrimination at BZ. With the ‘1BZ’ initiative launched in June 2022, the senior leadership conveyed in clear terms that we stand for a diverse and inclusive ministry. Be assured that we – the ministers and the members of the Senior Management Board – will continue drawing attention to this issue. For example, in 2023 we will organise discussions on the topic at the Ambassadors Conference and the Directors Conference.
- We are asking all managers at the ministry to work actively to build ‘1BZ’, in order to ensure that everyone in the organisation knows they are respected and welcome, and we will incorporate this into the HRM cycle. Every manager will be expected to work actively to ensure a safe and inclusive work culture in which staff support each other and hold each other to account for their behaviour. The staff of the Academy for International Relations and the DARE innovation team can support managers in these efforts by providing training courses and other methods.

And requires all staff to play an active role:

- In the coming period, the board and other managers will organise team-wide and small-group discussions to create a safe space for open and active communication about racism.
- We will continue investing in staff training on unconscious bias, active bystander intervention, and diversity and inclusion.
- We will examine whether there are other creative approaches that can help us, and we will take inspiration from the best practices of other organisations.

2.

Secondly, we will improve and simplify the options for reporting and responding to incidents. The aim is to be able to respond adequately to racism whenever it occurs and provide optimal support for staff in the unfortunate event that they experience it.

- We commissioned a study of willingness among staff to report incidents involving integrity-related issues and inappropriate behaviour. The report of findings will be presented soon. We will use the recommendations to further improve the reporting procedure to ensure that it is as accessible, safe and simple as possible and that reports are dealt with quickly and professionally. Attention will be given to the importance of an effective intake procedure, to ensure that in each case of reported racism, the most appropriate response is chosen.
- The reporting procedure will be described in clear terms so that it is accessible to everyone, and will include information about ways to respond, disciplinary policy, communication and aftercare.
- The board and all managers will actively communicate that reporting an incident will never have negative repercussions for the reporter’s career and that the reporting office is open to all colleagues: local employees at the missions, staff posted from the Netherlands, and those working at the ministry in The Hague.
- We will provide training and other methods to enhance the professionalism of our confidential advisers, both in The Hague and at the missions. We currently have about 100 internal confidential advisers. We are looking into engaging one or more confidential advisers with specialist knowledge of racism.

All of the steps described here are intended to help, encourage and enable members of staff to report racism and other incidents without fear.

We encourage staff to share their experiences via the Integrity Reporting Office so that we can take appropriate steps. You can contact the reporting office by phone or email. We want to assure you all that it is a safe place to tell your story. If you find it difficult to contact the reporting office yourself, ask a colleague or someone else to help you, or seek the advice of a confidential adviser. In the

coming period, we will create extra capacity for handling reports if necessary. There is also an external confidential adviser who speaks English, Spanish, French and Arabic.

3.

Thirdly, we are working to build an organisation in which there is no place for racism. The aim is to eradicate racism from BZ, both at the ministry in The Hague and at the missions. The following actions will be taken in addition to those mentioned above:

- We will examine the recruitment and selection process in order to eliminate bias and remove barriers. We will ensure that selection procedures are transparent and that particular attention is paid to the following elements:
 - broad-based recruitment that reaches all possible target groups, especially people with a bicultural or otherwise diverse background;
 - objective, non-discriminatory selection criteria;
 - equal application of procedures to all candidates;
 - diversity in candidate lists;
 - where necessary, transparent and reasoned divergence from parameters in order to promote diversity.
- A study is currently under way to examine policy and regulations concerning the promotion of staff to more senior roles at a number of other organisations, both within and outside the Netherlands, that are to a certain extent similar to BZ. Partly on the basis of the results of that study, we will take additional measures to foster diversity in staff promotions, with a special focus on bicultural staff. We will remove barriers and will, for example, provide extra career support to bicultural staff who wish to receive it.
- If a bicultural member of staff or a local employee who is a person of colour resigns, we will explicitly discuss with them whether racism played a role in their decision so that we can learn how to adjust our behaviour.
- We will consider whether further research is needed to improve the action we are taking to prevent and combat racism.

All of these actions will apply to local employees at the foreign missions, staff posted abroad and staff in The Hague. It is unavoidable that local employees have a different legal status than civil servants because they must be employed on the basis of a contract that complies with the laws of the host country. However, that difference in legal status can have no bearing on the way we treat each other. Everyone is essential in the work we do together and everyone deserves to be respected and valued.

We are going to do everything we can to ensure that every member of staff, wherever they are in the world, feels welcome and valued, can be themselves, is treated respectfully and is able to maximise their potential. 1BZ: for one and all. Let's build it together.

On behalf of the Senior Management Board
Paul Huijts
Secretary-General, Ministry of Foreign Affairs