

## **Letter of 17 April 2025 to the President of the House of Representatives from the Minister of Foreign Affairs on a mission network that is fit for purpose, in a time of spending cuts**

In November 2024 I informed the House that I would make a broader assessment of where in the world we want to have diplomatic representation and in what form, given global developments and the government's policy choices.<sup>1</sup> In this letter I will explain the changes I plan to make to our representation across the world in view of the spending cuts of 10% that have been set for the mission network.

### **Realistic foreign policy – consequences for the mission network**

The world around us is rapidly becoming a harsher and more turbulent place. Power politics and self-interest are gaining ground. The post-Cold War world, in which security, economic interests and human rights were relatively easy to reconcile, no longer exists. We are transitioning towards a new geopolitical reality.

Instead of a world order where the West is setting the tone, a new reality is emerging in which various power blocs are struggling for influence. Old alliances can no longer be taken for granted. Non-state actors, like criminal and terrorist groups, increasingly pose a threat to our security. Around the world, countries are making new choices about who they want as partners.

Far-reaching changes are thus under way around the world, fuelled by China's assertive stance, Russia's aggressive power politics, the emergence of middle powers, and the reorientation of African countries towards new partners. Even our relations with the US are changing, as everyone is aware.

This has major consequences for the Netherlands and for Europe as a whole. We can no longer rely automatically on the countries, organisations and international agreements that for decades brought us stability and prosperity. At the same time, however, we remain heavily dependent on the outside world for our security and prosperity.

The reality within our own borders is changing too. Now more than ever, events abroad are a topic of conversation. More and more people in the Netherlands are seeing how the changing world order is affecting – and possibly even threatening – their daily lives. Take for instance rising supermarket prices and high energy bills, and the strong emotions elicited by the conflict in the Middle East. There are also increasing concerns about hybrid threats and the possibility of a new war in Europe.

This new reality requires a targeted approach. The government is pursuing a realistic foreign policy that serves the interests of the Netherlands and its people, honours our values, and defends our freedoms.<sup>2</sup> We will increasingly have to seek a new balance when weighing up our values, economic interests and resilience. These are difficult political choices that affect everyone in our society.

The job of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs is to help make these choices. We do so together with the relevant ministries in The Hague, taking careful account of the Kingdom's interests, with everyone working on the basis of their own role and responsibility. The retrenchment puts added pressure on that task. Future-proof diplomacy thus requires the ministry to be even more rigorous in deciding what we need, at a minimum, in order to stand up for the Netherlands' interests. This will have consequences for the mission network: some missions will have to close, others will be reduced in size. This will be painful, but it is necessary if we are to remain effective with fewer resources in a shifting world order.

### **A mission network that is fit for purpose and the retrenchment**

The Ministry of Foreign Affairs will have to find different ways of working and make different choices. The emphasis of what we do will be more on security and prosperity – but we will not lose sight of our values. Some matters will remain as important as ever: Dutch nationals can continue

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<sup>1</sup> Request to develop measures to cut spending on the mission network, dated 18 November 2024.

<sup>2</sup> Government programme 2024.

to count on the consular services they are entitled to expect from the Dutch government. In addition, Dutch businesses and civil society organisations must be able to rely on the Netherlands representing their interests at international level. This means it is essential to have a mission network that is fit for purpose.

Dutch embassies and consulates-general spot opportunities, build bridges and recognise dependencies. They help Dutch businesses succeed abroad and make sure that Dutch people can travel abroad well prepared. We keep the lines of communication open, even with countries we disagree with. By doing so we complement the Netherlands' defence efforts: through diplomacy, aid and trade we help prevent the Netherlands from becoming entangled in conflicts, crises or wars.

A fit-for-purpose mission network means that the ministry has missions at locations where the Netherlands has scope for action: we must have a presence where we can effectively stand up for the Kingdom's interests. These interests are laid down in policy letters, the framework coalition agreement and the government programme.

### **Closure of missions**

The retrenchment applicable to our embassies, consulates-general and permanent representations abroad amounts to 10%. This is around EUR 70 million in total. At the ministry in The Hague, where the work of many departments relates directly to that of the missions, the retrenchment amounts to 22%.<sup>3</sup> Given the need to cut spending, the ministry has identified where changes to the mission network would be advisable given the current geopolitical situation.<sup>4</sup>

At present, I intend to close five embassies – Bujumbura (Burundi), Havana (Cuba), Juba (South Sudan), Tripoli (Libya), Yangon (Myanmar) – and two consulates-general – Antwerp (Belgium) and Rio de Janeiro (Brazil).

These closures will contribute significantly to the spending cuts required of the mission network. In order to achieve the remaining savings, it will be necessary to close four additional missions in the coming period. We will take geopolitical and economic developments into account when developing these plans further, which we will do in due course. The House will be duly informed. The closure of the above missions will allow us to make structural savings of EUR 25 million.

At the same time, in the coming period I may need to open Dutch representations in other parts of the world, such as Syria, depending on how developments unfold.

Information about how the ministry will achieve the remaining savings required by the retrenchment and about any expansion of the mission network will be provided in the Ministry of Foreign Affairs' 2026 draft budget.

### **Considerations and process**

During the decision-making process, a combination of factors were weighed up: our interests, our scope for action, and the cost of our presence in a given location. When identifying these interests in relation to the embassies, account was taken of bilateral political interests, security issues, trade and the economy, international development, consular services and the missions' specific circumstances. In regard to the consulates-general, we assessed the Netherlands' economic, consular and cultural interests, as well as its scope for action. For all missions, we took account of how many – and which – other EU member states and like-minded countries have a presence in the location concerned. Another factor was what alternatives there are to promote our interests (or have others do so) and to implement programmes, for example via the EU.

The assessment of Dutch interests and scope for action led us to ask to what degree our presence in certain locations was still effective (Havana, Yangon, Tripoli). The relative interests and relative scope for action in both the Great Lakes Region and the Horn of Africa led to the decision to close

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<sup>3</sup> Government programme 2024.

<sup>4</sup> Motion submitted by MPs Kati Piri and Caspar Veldkamp, Parliamentary Paper 36410-V, no. 51.

the embassies in South Sudan and Burundi. An additional factor with regard to Juba and Tripoli was the enormous costs involved (relating mainly to the mitigation of security risks).

With regard to the closure of the consulates-general, it should be noted that the Netherlands continues to attach great importance to its bilateral relations with the countries concerned. Tasks will be transferred to other parts of the network in those countries, such as Netherlands Business Support Offices (NBSOs) or the principal mission.

Our network in Brazil, for example, not only consists of the embassy in Brasilia and the consulate-general in São Paulo, but also includes two NBSOs. This means the Netherlands will still be able to maintain a network of representations in Brazil that properly reflects the relationship between the Netherlands and Brazil. The tasks of the consulate-general in Antwerp will be arranged differently. The proximity of the principal mission in Brussels (which is also the seat of the government of Flanders) offers an alternative in this regard.

With all mission closures we will follow a schedule that leaves room for a careful and thorough handover and phase-out of tasks and programmes. For example, we will arrange co-accreditation for all embassies that are to be closed, to ensure that another Dutch embassy can assume the representation of the Netherlands and Dutch nationals.

The planned closure of a mission is a far-reaching decision. It not only affects the Netherlands' bilateral relations with the country in question, but also ultimately means the loss of jobs - among local employees and staff posted from The Hague alike. It is therefore essential to exercise due care in all preparation and communications concerning these measures. The staff at the missions and the authorities in the countries concerned will be informed about these changes at the same time as the House.