

## SPEAKING NOTE

(June 21, 2002 at Protocol Office, FCO)

1. Members of the Diplomatic Corp at the Court of St. James's were greatly surprised when they were informed by the officials of the Greater London Authority that before the Authority set out to decide on which categories of people should be included in paying the congestion fee and who should be left out, they consulted the Foreign and Commonwealth Office (FCO) about the Diplomatic Corps. According to these officials, we understand that FCO told them that there would be no legal problem if the diplomats were charged the congestion fee, like anyone else.
  - It is most disappointing, to say the least, for FCO not to have consulted the Diplomatic Corps before presenting their advice to the Greater London Authority.
  - It is also unfortunate that the issue was looked at more through the Vienna Convention view point forgetting the role we are all here to perform; of building good understanding and relationship between the United Kingdom (UK) and our respective countries. This is, perhaps, one key reason why diplomats enjoy certain privileges in many countries not enjoyed by the rest of the population.
2. It is a fact that over the years, diplomats especially from developing and least developed countries have come to feel the rising cost of living in almost every aspect of life (food, clothing, transport, accommodation, utilities like water and electricity), and so on here in London.

- As a result, several Missions have had to cut down on staff and even activities, to reduce on cost. This to us is not good at all for the continuation of building ties and good relationship between UK and our respective countries.
  - Because of the high cost of houses and rent, especially within the centre of London, most developing and least developed countries have residences for their Heads of Mission and staff accommodation, outside the boundaries of Central London. These, therefore, have no way of escaping the adverse effects of the congestion fee system.
3. Diplomats who have worked in other capitals get greatly surprised when they compare London with other cities and find that London has the least diplomatic privileges. In other countries:
- ✓ Diplomats are exempted from paying VAT
  - ✓ They have free parking space at airports
  - ✓ They are not charged for using VIP lounges
  - ✓ They have several parking bays at their places of work - to mention but a few privileges, which is not the case with London or UK generally.
4. This raises the important question, why there seems to be a difference in interpreting the Vienna Convention in UK from other countries.
5. We hope that it is appreciated that diplomats drive into the City centre:

- Not because it is a pleasure ride but out of necessity considering their nature of work which demands them to be in different places at different and sometimes, awkward times.
  - Because there is, sometimes, security risk involved in some categories of diplomats, if they were to use public transport.
  - With the many trips diplomats are usually expected to make daily, it would be impossible for the diplomats to use public transport. Cost alone would be prohibitive.
6. Bearing all the issues mentioned above in mind, but emphasising the importance of maintaining good working atmosphere between UK and our respective countries, it would be an excellent gesture if the Greater London Authority were to be persuaded to exempt diplomats from paying the congestion fee.
7. The Diplomatic Corps submitted their request to the Greater London Authority for this exemption.
- In reply, the Chief Executive says in his letter (attached to this Speaking Note for ease of reference) that the issue is still under consideration.
8. It would be a great boost on the part of the diplomatic corps, if FCO came to our rescue and appealed to the Mayor of London to exempt the diplomats from paying this draconian fee.
9. This is the appeal we have come to present to you, as Deans of various Groups of the Diplomatic Corps from Asia, Arab, the Caribbean and Pacific, Africa and the Dean of the Diplomatic Corps at the Court of St. James's.