



United States Department of State

Washington, D.C. 20520

SEP 14 2017

The Honorable
Eleanor Holmes Norton
House of Representatives
Washington, DC 20515

Dear Ms. Norton:

Thank you for your letter dated August 28 regarding buildings owned by foreign missions in the District of Columbia that become vacant and in disrepair. The Department takes this matter very seriously and understands the problems and challenges residents face when foreign governments fail to adequately maintain their buildings and residences in the District of Columbia.

The Department's Office of Foreign Missions (OFM) has a long track record of working closely and collaboratively with the District's Office of International Affairs on strategies and efforts to motivate foreign governments to manage their property assets in a way that is in compliance with the laws and regulations of the District and respectful of their neighbors and our constituents. Many of these efforts are not always publicly known and our combined attempts at achieving the desired resolution for the more prolonged cases have obviously been unsuccessful. With this said, we have found that letters like yours and press attention to such matters have proven in the past to be tools that we have effectively used to motivate certain foreign governments to maintain their real estate assets in a responsible and respectful manner.

We are also in full agreement that via the Foreign Missions Act, Congress has provided the Department with wide latitude to require foreign governments to substantially comply with the District's building codes and regulations. However, the crux of our challenge is the limitations on our ability, as well as that of our District Government partners, under the Vienna Convention on Diplomatic Relations to sufficiently enforce such compliance. Thus, once all attempts to motivate, encourage, and require corrective actions have failed, our final recourse is often to simply revoke a property's entitlement to diplomatic status, resulting in the loss of inviolability and tax exemption. This is the action that was taken several years in the case of the Pakistan properties in the referenced *Northwest Current* article. Once this decision was executed, the District's Office of Tax and Revenue, the Department of Consumer and Regulatory Affairs, and others were free to manage the situation no differently than they would property owned by a corporation or private citizen.

Aside from the Pakistan properties, your letter referenced several other properties/embassies and so we wanted to provide with our view of where the situation stands with each of those.

- **Argentina** 2136 R Street, NW – This property has not been considered “diplomatic” for many years. However, OFM was informed earlier this year that the Argentine Government has authorized the Embassy to sell this and several other properties they own in the District.

- **Egypt 5500 16th Street, NW** – The Embassy has informed OFM that they have recently awarded a contract to renovate this property.
- **Iraq 3110 Woodland Drive, NW** – The Department has informed the Embassy that it must initiate the long planned renovation of this property no later than October 31, 2017, in order to prevent the removal of the location's diplomatic status – inviolability and tax exemption.
- **Serbia 2221 R Street, NW** – This property has been vacant since the breakup of the Yugoslavia in 1992. From that time to 2012, the Yugoslav successor states negotiated the assignment amongst themselves of assets owned by Yugoslavia. Once Serbia became the legal owner of this building they developed a full renovation/modernization plan and obtain the approval of the Foreign Missions Board of Zoning Adjustment to proceed. However, the Serbian Embassy does not have funding available at this time to execute this contract. OFM is working with the Embassy on some alternative options, but we unfortunately do not have any solid progress or forward plans to report at this time.
- **Sri Lanka 2148 Wyoming Avenue, NW** – The Embassy has reversed its original decision to make this building available for commercial leasing and is now moving to use it as an annex of its chancery. As a result, OFM has restored its diplomatic status and reinstated its entitlement to a tax exemption.

With the understanding that there are practical limits that interfere with our ability confidently ensure desired outcomes with respect to these types of situations, please know that OFM stands ready to aggressively engage foreign missions with respect to these matters.

The Director (Acting) of OFM, Cliff Seagroves, would be the appropriate individual to discuss this issue with you directly and is available to meet at your convenience.

Sincerely,



Charles S. Faulkner
Bureau of Legislative Affairs