

LTT POUR RV DE MIDI

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1. SUBJECT

LTT on Graessle report on 'unacceptable' holidays for EEAS staff

2. LTT

- Mrs Graessle has taken the most extreme case possible - somebody who works in a Delegation in a dangerous country, who takes all the statutory holidays, all the additional rest periods linked to a hardship posting, does training courses, and works large amounts of overtime and takes flexitime to compensate. She then attempts to give the impression that this is the general rule. This clearly does not reflect the reality of working in our Delegations.
- The idea that "the offices of EU staff members are empty for many months of the year" is plain ridiculous. And it is wrong to count overtime compensation as annual 'holidays'.
- The rules which currently apply date from the period before the EEAS came into existence.
- Our Heads of Delegations themselves have been prime movers in highlighting the problems in the system and pressing for change.
- High Representative Ashton supports change.
- We have held several meetings with the European Commission to look at revising/reducing some of these schemes, and we will also of course work with the Parliament on revising these rules.

The facts:

- in Delegations, Commission and EEAS staff are entitled to 3.5 days of leave per month, so a maximum of 42 days, which can rise to 48, taking into consideration grade and seniority. Public holidays vary from one country to another and the maximum number of days is 18.

- in Delegations which are regarded as hardship posts (29 Delegations or 20% of the total, Iraq, Afghanistan etc), you can have additional rest leave periods (from 6 to 15 days a year), allowing staff and families to have necessary relief from a difficult security environment and psychological pressure. This extra leave is common to all diplomatic services. It applies to 587 EU staff (383 Commission staff and 204 EEAS staff).

- flexitime compensation is not annual 'holidays' - it is a statutory right and normal for most modern employers.

3. BACKGROUND

17 weeks holiday a year for Ashton's EU bureaucrats

Diplomats working in Baroness Ashton's EU foreign service are entitled to 83 days or almost 17 weeks holiday a year, entitlements more than four times the holiday allowance enjoyed by most British workers.

By Bruno Waterfield, Brussels

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22 Comments

Pressure is growing on the European Commission to overhaul Brussels staffing regulations that leave overseas EU leaving embassies and delegations empty for "many months" a year.

Generous holiday and flexitime are also topped up with two weeks off for "professional training in Brussels", meaning that overseas diplomats, representing 60 per cent of the EU's foreign service, can be out of the office for 19 weeks, nearly five working months, a year.

On top of that, additional "special leave" entitlements mean that diplomats working in 30 EU delegations in the Far-east, Asia and Africa can have their desks unfilled for between 21 to 24 weeks, up to half the working year due to time-off for officials.

This group of EU officials are also entitled to "two days travelling time and a paid business-class journey to Brussels or Phuket for the official and his/her family".

A "working document" produced by Ingeborg Graessle, a German Christian Democrat MEP, has concluded that time-off is so liberal for staff that for much of the year the European foreign service is on holiday rather than being at work in the EU's 130 delegations across the world.

"The offices of EU staff members are empty for many months of the year – a state of affairs which must be seen in the context of very high net salaries and the provision of accommodation free of charge," she concluded.

"Given the lengthy periods of absence from work for whatever reason, some posts in third countries are effectively half-time posts for which a full salary is paid."

Mrs Graessle is pushing for a rule change meaning that annual leave and flexitime given to EU diplomats may not exceed 49 days, a reduction of 34 days or seven weeks. The maximum period of rest or special leave, for officials in countries such as Iraq, would be reduced to 15 working days from 25.

An EU diplomat working in Sri Lanka is entitled to almost 19 weeks off, 46 days more than their colleagues working in Colombo's German embassy. EU officials in Washington or New York are entitled to over seven weeks more time-off than German diplomats.

The current situation is frustrating for Lady Ashton, who created the European External Action Service (EEAS) at the beginning of 2010, because she inherited rigid Commission staffing rules, drawn up for a predominantly Brussels-based bureaucracy not for an overseas foreign service.

EEAS sources have told The Daily Telegraph that senior diplomats working overseas have constantly raised the time-off issue as a problem that has leaves front line EU delegations empty or short-staffed for long periods.

"Cathy Ashton supports change. We have held several meetings with the Commission to look at the issues of revising rules on annual leave and public holidays," said her spokesman.

Britain is supporting reform to bring entitlements for the expanding EU diplomatic corps, which had a 5.8 per cent budget increase this year, into line with national foreign services, which have faced cuts.

"The package for EEAS staff serving overseas is very generous, as is the package for all staff working in the institutions in Brussels. Cuts need to be made," said a British diplomat.

William Dartmouth, a Ukip MEP on the parliament foreign affairs committee said: "It is about time that the British taxpayer got a long vacation from paying for the greedy, grasping, and guzzling bureaucrats of Brussels."

:: The British head of the EU's environment agency has come under fire for spending over £250,000 to decorate her Copenhagen headquarters with plants and for holding staff training trips worth £28,000 in the Caribbean or Mediterranean.

Jacqueline McGlade, an environmental scientist who has headed the agency since 2003, has been accused of a conflict of interest for booking bio-diversity training courses run by an NGO that she had close links to.

The agency defended high-carbon impact trips to locations such as the Caribbean as "in line with a priority to raise awareness of environmental issues and develop expertise".

Agency staff also complained to the European Parliament about expenditure on a "green façade", spending that officials alleged came at the price of cancelling environmental projects.

"The only legal way to erect such a facade was to appropriate funds approved for other scientific purposes," said an email leaked by the Brussels website EUObserver.

Katja Rosenbohm, a spokesman for the EU environment agency, insisted that the flowering façade had been funded from PR budgets "for public outreach purposes". We had 18,000 hits on our website," she said.