

IN MEMORIAM

Former Chairman of the NHC Executive Board Jan Herman van Roijen Passes Away

Jan Herman Robert Dudley van Roijen, former Chairman of the Executive Board of the Netherlands Helsinki Committee, passed away in Wassenaar on 14 January 2024 at the age of 88. Ambassador van Roijen was educated at Ashbury College in Ottawa and at Groton School, Massachusetts, U.S.A. After his graduation he went on to study Law at the University of Utrecht. He was the third generation in a distinguished diplomatic family, with roots in both the Netherlands and the United States.

His father was Dutch Minister of Foreign Affairs shortly after World War II, and in later years Dutch Ambassador to the United States (1950 -1964) and London (1964-1970). He played a key role in negotiating the Van Roijen-Roem agreement in May 1949 that led to the formal transfer of Dutch sovereignty to the new Republic of Indonesia in December of 1949.

Our former chairman followed in his father's footsteps, and served three times at the Dutch Embassy in Jakarta, lastly as Ambassador in the early nineties. At that time relations between Jakarta and The Hague were difficult after Indonesia rejected further Dutch aid as a response to public criticism of violation of human rights in Indonesia by the Dutch minister for Development Cooperation. Ambassador van Roijen had the sensitive task of carefully managing bilateral relations, both in view of the Netherlands' colonial past in Indonesia and the existing substantial economic and cultural relations

In earlier postings Ambassador van Roijen served in several capitals where he witnessed historic changes. When the city of Saigon fell in April 1975, he was one of the last Western diplomats to be evacuated. Reportedly, when he entered the crowded American helicopter, he was given the choice between taking a heavy bag full of gold sovereigns, the Embassy's financial reserve, and a suitcase with his personal belongings. He didn't hesitate and chose the bag of gold. During his years in the Dutch delegation to NATO in the late sixties he witnessed the first beginning of détente between East and West. At the same time he experienced the brutal repression of the attempts for more freedom during the Prague Spring of 1968.

As Ambassador to Israel from 1986-1989 he was witness to the failure of several attempts to promote a fair solution to the Palestinian question and the hardening of positions on both sides.

Young diplomats, including one of the authors of this In Memoriam, vividly recall Van Roijen in the early seventies as the Head of the recruitment division of the Foreign Service. He shortened and modernized the training of incoming young diplomats, he introduced internships during the summer months in Dutch embassies and consulates, and kept in touch with his pupils during their first postings. He was not afraid of maneuvering between vested interests, and tried to make the most of the upcoming merger of the Foreign Service and the staff of the Ministry. His reputation led to his appointment in 1990 as Head of the Joint Personnel Service.

From 1995 until his retirement in 1999 he served as Ambassador to the Court of St James in London.

Ambassador van Roijen chaired the NHC from 6 November 1999 on. One of his first decisions was to create an Executive Board of the Committee, which he chaired from 20 December 1999 until 1 January 2006.

In many ways this was a favourable period for the NHC. Many Central European countries were in the process of qualifying for membership of the European Union. The NHC was often instrumental in assisting governments and private organizations in introducing the rule of law, and reforming the judiciary and penitentiary institutions. The NHC organized conferences that enabled open discussions on such reforms. Many Dutch ministries and experts were keen to invest in the sharing of their expertise with their counterparts in the future member states. Adequate funding was available at the national and European level. As the accession to the EU of the Central European countries progressed, he promoted the NHC's work in possible candidate countries in the Western Balkans, visiting capitals and supporting the work of the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE).

Ambassador Van Roijen with his experience in developing countries and as a former Deputy Director General for International Cooperation was aware of the downside and risks of rapid development in countries that had known bureaucratic centralized economic structures. He also knew the ropes for obtaining government funding.

He was a man who knew how to get results. In his careful way he always went to the heart of a problem. He never shied away from initial rejection. At the same time, he showed full respect for the views and wishes of his counterparts. He would listen carefully, and then calmly outline his arguments and objectives and explain where his views differed from those of his interlocutor. In this way the road to further discussion and agreement remained open.

After his chairmanship he remained a member of the NHC until 2013, sharing his valuable experience with the organization.

We offer our deepest sympathy to his wife and his family.

Piet de Klerk,

Kees van Rij, and

Ian de Jong,

Present, future and former Chairmen of the NHC Supervisory Board.