

Diplomats in Britain owe millions in fines, accused of crime

Foreign Office figures show diplomatic missions owe 36,057,690 pounds (\$54.16 million, 44.43 million euros) for not paying London's congestion charge since 2003 — and half a million in parking and traffic fines in 2009 alone.

- AFP
- Published: 08:15 June 30, 2010

London: Foreign diplomats in Britain have been accused of human trafficking, domestic violence, drink driving and threats to kill — and owe more than 36 million pounds in traffic fines, new figures reveal.

Foreign Office figures show diplomatic missions owe 36,057,690 pounds (\$54.16 million, 44.43 million euros) for not paying London's congestion charge since 2003 — and half a million in parking and traffic fines in 2009 alone.

But the 25,000 people entitled to diplomatic immunity in Britain are not simply using it to avoid traffic penalties, according to the figures revealed Monday.

Last year, 17 people were accused of drink driving and serious crimes - those warranting at least a year in jail.

This includes two people accused of human trafficking, one from the Saudi Arabian embassy and one from the Sierra Leone mission, a Saudi accused of sexual assault and a Pakistani official accused of threatening to kill someone.

A member of the Gambian mission was accused of shoplifting, a Nigerian of actual bodily harm and numerous officials — including from Saudi Arabia and Bahrain — were accused of drink-driving.

Previous years saw further accusations of drink driving as well as of dangerous driving by a Russian diplomat, domestic assault and car theft by South African officials, and robbery by one of Guyana's diplomats.

The biggest offender in non-payment of the London congestion charge is the United States embassy, which owed 3,821,880 pounds at the end of January. It is followed by Russia (3.20 million pounds) and Japan (2.77 million pounds).

The embassies say they are exempt from all taxes in their host nation but authorities in the British capital insist the congestion charge, levied on vehicles entering the city at peak times, is not a tax and they must pay up.

Other parking and traffic fines incurred by diplomatic missions and international organisations last year totalled 534,060 pounds, of which only 7,760 pounds have so far been paid.

Kazakhstan topped the list of non-payments by a long way, owing 147,880 pounds in 2009, followed by Afghanistan (34,780 pounds), the United Arab Emirates (24,440 pounds), China (22,760 pounds) and Cyprus (22,540 pounds).

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