

News Release | September 21, 2022

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JULIUS BERGER COMMISSIONS ULTRA-MODERN CASHEW PROCESSING PLANT IN EPE LAGOS

The coastal town of Epe in Lagos State came alive with excitement on Saturday with the commissioning of the country and perhaps West Africa's most ultra-modern cashew processing plant by Nigeria's leading engineering construction company, Julius Berger Nigeria Plc, which finally births its strategic plan to transform into a conglomerate in the nearest future.

The commissioning of the *state-of-the-art* cashew plant is an effort by the company, reputed for its sustainable business offerings, at diversifying into the economically significant agricultural industry in addition to its thriving construction major.

According to the Chairman of Julius Berger's Board of Directors, Mr. Mutiu Sunmonu, who presented the keynote address at the event, the occasion marked a pivotal moment in the company's history, ***"as we are ready to succeed and move in the right direction tremendously for Nigeria, our employees and shareholders."***

Mr. Sunmonu recalled the history of the company in Nigeria saying that since 1965 when Julius Berger entered Nigeria with the construction of Eko Bridge in Lagos, ***"we have always represented ourselves very well with our trademark great value chain....We have now strategically diversified Julius Berger from being only an engineering construction entity into agricultural produce processing for which we all know Nigerians have a historical antecedent and understandable nostalgia"***. He added that, there is a lot that the company still has in the pipeline. ***"As we continue to work on our plans, you will see us transform into a conglomerate,"*** he said.

The Chairman revealed that the new factory is semi-automated for premium international quality cashew processing, designed to produce about 60 tons per day. ***"We seriously aim to create and sustain increasing value and add significantly to Nigeria's GDP"***, he added.

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Directors: Mr. M. Sunmonu, CON, Chairman • Mr. G. Marks, Vice Chairman (German) • Engr. Dr. L. Richter, Managing Director (German)
Mr. C. Hausemann, Financial Director (German) • Alh. Z. I. Bayi, Director Administration • Mr. T. Meletschus, Director Corporate Development (German) • Mr. C. O. Anya, Esq.
Dr. E. N. Azudialu-Obiejesi • Engr. J. Damulak • Amb. A. S. Daura, MFR • Mrs. B. A. Disu, CAL • Mr. E. C. Ebi, MFR, FCIB • Engr. G. M. Sheikh • Mrs. G. O. Talabi

The Managing Director of Julius Berger Nigeria Plc, Engr. Dr. Lars Richter, in his speech, said that by the commissioning of the factory, Julius Berger has inaugurated its first diversification project, marking another significant milestone in the company's relationship with Nigeria. ***"Today we start another milestone in our relationship with Nigeria built from the past into the future,"*** he said.

Richter added that ***"...since 1965, when Julius Berger Nigeria entered into the country and began operations in Lagos, it has never looked back in its strategic contributions to national development. That mission will continue."*** Dr. Richter continued, ***"...our launch into agriculture is part of our larger ambition of diversifying the Julius Berger Group, expanding our positive impact and extending our contribution to Nigeria, beyond construction."*** He added that ***"I can't help but speak about how far we have come as a company and how much more we hope to achieve"***, even as he thanked members of Epe community for welcoming the company and partnering with it for greater heights for the country's cashew industry and the country as a whole.

Julius Berger's Director of Corporate Development, Tobias Meletschus, in his remark after a tour of the factory, said that the project is a determination towards greater corporate growth as ***"this is a tremendous achievement and our first step into agro-processing."***

Declaring that the company values productive and result-oriented partnerships, which are innovative and guarantee the highest quality of product and service, Meletschus explained further that the company is, ***"already partnering with farmers, employing over 300 employees with impressive payroll even as we target a zero-waste policy at our production plant. All these alongside the fact that our cashew is farmed and processed locally make our efforts home-grown and essentially unique."***

Minister of Agriculture, Dr. Mohammad Mahmood Abubakar was represented by Mrs. Abimbola Oguntuyi, while the Minister of Industry was represented by Malam Ali Adamu, a Deputy Director in the Ministry. Others who graced the occasion include the Lagos State Commissioner for Agriculture, Arc. Abisola Olusanya who represented His Excellency, Gov. Babajide Sanwo-Olu, and Mr. Tokunbo Talabi, Secretary to the Ogun State Government. His Royal Highness, the Olisa Odomola, Y. T. Rasheed Aji and his Chiefs were also present at the ceremony. Top management of key financial institutions also attended the event.

Others present at the event are Mrs. Obidike Ifeyinwa Evelyn, the Director, Product Development Department of the Nigerian Export Promotion Council, representing the Council's CEO; and Mrs. Talatu Ethan, Director, Lagos Operations, representing the Standards Organization of Nigeria (SON). The President of the Cashew Processors and Packaging Association of Nigeria, Mr. Daniel Gemana was also present at the epoch-making ceremony.

Germany's Agency for International Development, GIZ, was also eminently represented. GIZ's Programme Leader for West Africa, Rita Weidinger, led its delegation to Epe for the ceremony. According to the GIZ, its research showed that cashew processing is a viable venture for development in Nigeria. ***"In Nigeria, after an intense opportunity mapping phase where we were assessing potential sectors, we have identified the cashew value chain as a promising sector to achieve our objectives...we are very happy that we found Julius Berger Nigeria as a strong and committed private sector partner and we are joining forces to collaborate on professionalizing skills development and enhancing the competitiveness of the cashew value chain in Nigeria"***, said the spokesperson for GIZ.

After the tour of the processing plant and inspection of the finished and packaged product for export, the representative of the Honourable Minister of Agriculture, Mrs. Abimbola Oguntuyi on behalf of the Minister commended Julius Berger for the well-thought-out investment, employment-generation initiative and gross domestic product (GDP)-improving project.

Other officials in Julius Berger's hosting entourage at the event were the company's Board members and the Company Secretary; management staff of the corporation, the JBN Cashew Plant Project Managers, Tarcisio Falcao, Denis Steppuhn, and Mrs. Foluke Abidoye, amongst many others.