

News Release | May 24, 2023

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Much Excitement and Gratitude in Onitsha as Julius Berger Delivers Second River Niger Bridge for Commissioning by President Buhari

There was palpable excitement from Asaba and Onitsha to across the South East of the country yesterday, as President Muhammadu Buhari, GCFR, commissioned the Second River Niger Bridge. The event was part of the seven legacy projects simultaneously inaugurated by the President via zoom same day.

The colourful commissioning of the Second River Niger Bridge that held on the Bridge at the Asaba end of the project had in attendance a full complement of who's who in the South East geopolitical zone, including governors, ministers, members and distinguished senators of the National Assembly as well as first-class traditional rulers and redcap chiefs of both Onitsha and Asaba Kingdoms.

Speaking virtually at the ceremony from the Executive Council Chambers of the Presidential Villa, Abuja, President Buhari in his project commissioning speech said it was not by accident that the project was awarded and constructed. He said it was deliberately conceived, funded and executed to attract predetermined benefits to the people of the area and indeed the country in general. In his words, "This project has been long in the making and has seen many hiccups; certainly now, it is a reality that will bring relief to all those that cross from the South East to the South West."

The President added; "I am delighted that we are able to accomplish and commission this project even at the twilight of our administration. It was not by accident, but it was a deliberate choice carefully made to fight poverty, create employment and make life better for the people. The bridge and its ancillary roads is designed to enhance the national economy, reduce travel time and increase the ease of doing business for its users".

President Buhari celebrated that every loan the Federal Government had taken during his tenure as president is tied to a beneficial and lasting infrastructural project. He added that in 8years, his administration has successfully doubled the nation's infrastructure portfolio as well as the country's GDP from 20% to 40%.

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The President also acknowledged and thanked His Excellency, former President Goodluck Ebele Jonathan, GCFR, for the good roles he had played leading to the eventual success of the Second River Niger Bridge.

Minster of Works and Housing, Hon. Babatunde Raji Fashola, SAN, who referred to Julius Berger workers as “nation-builders”, noted that with the commissioning of the Second Niger Bridge, travel time for motorists has been reduced by 50 percent and that property values along the bridge corridor have appreciated, so also are related roads which have been enhanced by 30 percent.

The highpoint, however, of Mr. Fashola speech was when he surprised Mr. President with the decision of the Federal Executive Council to name the Bridge as ‘Mohammadu Buhari Second Niger Bridge’, a surprise for which the President in a good-natured banter called Mr. Fashola a ‘dictator’.

For the Anambra State Governor, His Excellency, Prof. Chukwuma Charles Soludo, it was all thanks to the Federal Government and Julius Berger for the unique accomplishment. He said, “...this project will no doubt further open up the South East. It reminds me of two lands of opportunities in the USA, New York and New Jersey. That is what I see in Asaba, Delta State and Onitsha, Anambra State with this project coming to fruition. I thank Julius Berger. You did a good job; an excellent and plausible job. I also believe that with the President’s serial project delivery and commissioning records, we can now rightly call President Buhari ‘Mr. Infrastructure’”.

The Imo State Governor, His Excellency, Hope Uzodinma, expressed same sentiments saying, “...Buhari is my hero, and I shed tears of joy today as I witness the successful completion and commissioning of this project by the Buhari administration”. While he thanked President Buhari for his clear show of goodness towards Ndigbo by the construction of the Bridge, Uzodinma added that the Bridge is not only linking Delta State to the South East, but it connects the entire old Eastern Region and opens doors to the outside world. The Imo State Governor also thanked the contractors, Julius Berger Nigeria Plc, for a great engineering performance in the construction and delivery of the Second River Niger Bridge.

In his speech, the Managing Director of Julius Berger Nigeria Plc, Engr. Dr. Lars Richter, expressed his gratitude to the Federal Government and all stakeholders for the opportunity given the company to show its professionalism, describing it as a success story. “It is a huge honour to be part of this success story linking both the East and the West of Nigeria”, he said. He specifically thanked President Buhari, the Federal Government, the Honourable Minster of Works and Housing, Babatunde Raji Fashola, the Honourable Minister of Finance, Budget and Planning, Hajiya Zainab, the Nigerian Sovereign Investment Authority (NSIA), the Federal Controllers and Resident Engineers from the Federal Ministry of Works, as well as the

chiefs, elders, women and the youths of the host communities, for their cooperation with Julius Berger while the construction works lasted.

The Minister of Labour, Dr. Chris Ngige, who referred to President Buhari as 'Ibu Ekuweme' (meaning he who make a promise and keeps it), performed the ceremonial cutting of the ribbon to declare the Second River Niger Bridge open for use. That was after President Buhari inaugurate it via zoom.

The first Niger Bridge was built in 1965 and it remained the crucial East-West link over the years. However due to age, excessive axle load and immense traffic congestion arising from the enhanced economic activities on the South-East/South-West transport corridor, the Federal Ministry of Works initiated and commenced the construction of the Second River Niger Bridge. The groundbreaking ceremony was performed on 10th March, 2014, signalling the take-off of the strategic national infrastructure. The Project (Phase 1) commences at CH 23+000 on the Asaba side and terminates at CH 34+900 on the Onitsha side. The total length of Phase 1 is 11,900m, which includes the construction of the Second River Niger Bridge with a length of approximately 1,600m consisting of a dual 3 lane of 30.10m width and two secondary bridges with an interchange on Onitsha – Owerri Road. Another important segment of the project's road works, are the toll stations with toll facilities and electrical infrastructure.