

Ramaphosa opens South Africa's first smartphone factory

President Cyril Ramaphosa opened South Africa's first smartphone factory at the Dube TradePort in Durban on Thursday. The launch of the Mara Phones plant comes 12 months after Mara Group company chief executive Ashish Thakkar announced at the inaugural Africa Investment Forum in November last year that the company would invest R1.5 billion in a South African business venture over the next five years.



Chief executive of Mara Phones Ashish Thakkar and President Cyril Ramaphosa at the launch of Mara Phones at the Dube Tradeport. Credit: Supplied by Dube Tradeport

The Rwanda-based Mara Group took the President on a tour of the modern factory on Thursday, which is anticipated to have an annual production capacity of over 1.2 million handsets of the Mara X and Mara Z cellphones.

A total of 200 people have been employed at the plant with 94% of them being youth, while 67% are women.

“ His Excellency President [@CyrilRamaphosa](#) inaugurates the official launch of Mara Phones manufacturing plant in Durban, Kwazulu-natal, South Africa [#MadeinSouthAfrica](#) [#MadeinAfrica](#) [#MaraPhonesSA](#) [#ProudlySA](#) [pic.twitter.com/JTDkCxHuFj](#)— Mara Phones (@MaraPhones) [October 17, 2019](#) ”

Speaking at the event, President Ramaphosa said the Mara Phone's venture was giving practical effects to government's investment drive.

“It was described as a pipe dream. Today we are reaping the fruits of what was promised. We are delighted about this great launch because it is going to instill a lot of confidence in other manufacturers that South Africa indeed is a place where they should all come and invest. We are delighted because Mara is a proudly African venture that is producing a South African product.”

He said the company's effort represents a great advance in the technological and electronical sector. “We are delighted that you are increasing our technological capabilities by bringing your company here and emboldening the skills talent that we have,” he said.



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Importance of SEZs

In his State of the Nation Address, President Ramaphosa said special economic zones, such as the Dube Trade Port, are important instruments and mediums of attracting foreign investment as well as domestic investment. The SEZs, he said, are also important in building targeted industrial capabilities and establishing new industrial hubs.

“Studies reveal that sea port cities grow faster than inland port cities due to their strategic locations. Durban is especially well-positioned but we actually add to that positioning by having that special SEZ. This in itself is a very good foundation to catapult our country to higher levels of growth,” he said.

He praised Thakkar for being a patriotic African. “He is clear, he’s articulate, he’s a visionary and knows exactly what he wants to achieve,” he said.



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Attracting investment

Thakkar thanked President Ramaphosa and the South African government for pushing the company to deliver on its undertaking. “We have come to South Africa much, much sooner than we have initially planned. We did this because of your vision of making South Africa shine again as a true investment destination and creating real jobs for our youth. It is truly working and we are proof of that,” he said.

As an African investor with investment in 25 African countries, he said venturing into South Africa has been a phenomenal experience. “It really does show that South Africa is ready and open for investment and for business. More boldness and vision encouraged us to do this and will hopefully contribute to your fourth industrial revolution ambition as well.

“We Africans really do walk that talk. Today is history in the making. [It is] a dream for South Africa, a dream for Africa, a dream for Mara, come true,” said Thakkar.

KwaZulu-Natal Premier Sihle Zikalala thanked Mara Phone for showing confidence in KwaZulu-Natal and South Africa. “The people of [KZN] are profoundly grateful and honoured to make history and open the first South African cellphone production plant,” he said.

Zikalala praised President Ramaphosa for what he described as tireless efforts and strides in promoting investment in South Africa.

“We are all aware of the efforts of the President to ensure that we attract investment and address the plight of South Africans who are unemployed and go to bed on empty stomachs. We hope this launch will go far in strengthening your resolve to continue championing our government’s cause of reducing unemployment, inequality and poverty,” he said.



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KZN manufacturing

Trade and Industry Minister Ebrahim Patel said it is good to see Africa changing the narrative of being a consumer of goods it does not produce. “We are changing that storyline with cars, with fibre optic cables, with television monitors, with food and now with smartphones ... It is good to see this,” he said.

He said the Mara Phones launch was critical in cementing KZN as a centre of advanced manufacturing. “The KZN manufacturing sector employs 350,000 people and it’s the sixth-largest manufacturing sector in the African economy. The implementation of the SEZ programme at the Dube Trade Port supported this growth in manufacturing.

“If you walk around you will see fibre optic cables being made, television monitors being assembled ... you see examples of manufacturing in South Africa. From this example and what we’ve done here and other examples in the country. We are moving forward,” said Patel.

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