

Ladies and Gentlemen,

Antwerp and diamonds are synonyms. 84 % of all rough diamonds and 50 % of all polished diamonds worldwide are being traded in this city. 1.700 companies are officially registered as diamond traders. 6.600 people are directly employed in the Antwerp diamond industry, 26.000 additional jobs are generated due to indirect effects. The four largest diamond mining companies have an office in Antwerp, half of them even sell their entire production exclusively in Antwerp. Diamonds represent an impressive 5 % of the total Belgian export and an even more impressive 15 % of the Belgian export to countries outside the European Union.

When confronted with such figures, we would almost forget that the diamond industry is a global business by definition. Rough diamonds are extracted in more than twenty countries on all continents. After extraction, these rough diamonds are sorted and traded in the trade centres, of which this beautiful city of Antwerp is the oldest and biggest one. After being cut and polished, the diamonds end up in jewellery pieces that are bought by millions of customers, all over the world.

The importance of this international dimension will increase steeply. Every single day, the middle class is expanding, especially in emerging economies. A recent study pointed out that the middle class in China will expand by 8,4 % on an annual basis, and that 56 % of the population will belong to the middle class by 2024. The figures for India are staggering too. Only the day before yesterday, I returned from an economic mission to India where I had the opportunity to discuss the diamond trade. I will come back to this in a moment. As a result of an annual growth of nearly ten per cent 109 million households will belong to the middle class by 2024. Many of them will be interested in buying diamond jewels. Moreover, many jewellers and traders will rely upon Antwerp to continue providing the highest quality and quantity of diamonds.

Having the responsibility of Foreign Trade as a Member of the federal Government, an important part of my job is to promote our country as an investment location and to support Belgian companies in their international activities. Such trade missions are very important, as new trade partners and new opportunities rise on a daily basis, all over the world.

Wherever and whenever I have the opportunity, I speak about diamonds in my bilateral contacts with policy makers and captains of industry, just as I did on several occasions during my mission to India. Diamond is by far the most important export product of our country to India, with a share of over eighty per cent. As all of you know, the country has big ambitions, yet Antwerp has unique advantages that make mining companies and diamonds traders prefer this city. Furthermore, Antwerp is the hub for rough diamonds, but also for a significant portion of the polished market, and India is the nerve centre for the grinding industry. As both have a different specialization, we should not compete but translate this in strong, complementary bilateral relations.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

The federal Government of Belgium is determined to preserve the right conditions for this industry and to create sufficient incentives to keep the diamond industry embedded in Belgium. I am committed to supporting the initiatives taken by the Antwerp World Diamond Centre and by the sector to create a competitive and transparent business environment. The Government is consulting the European Commission on the introduction of diamond turnover tax for all diamond traders in Antwerp. A competitive carat tax will provide a compelling case for the sector to embrace fiscal and financial transparency and compliance as indispensable attributes of your daily operations. The Government and the AWDC are also looking for a sustainable solution to the wind down of the Antwerp Diamond Bank. We are fully aware that the availability of sufficient funding is essential to continuously protect Antwerp as premier market for rough and polished diamond trading.

Besides all this, I would like to draw your attention to the efforts the Government and the city of Antwerp are making to guarantee your safety in your home town and country. We want you to feel safe although we all know, after the recent events in Paris, that absolute safety does not exist. Nevertheless, you and your businesses are in this quiet, stable and prosperous city better off, in a lot of perspectives, than somewhere else in the world.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

In foreign trade, I do not only promote the interests of the Antwerp diamond industry abroad, but also take diamonds as an example of Belgian expertise, craftsmanship, design, innovation and quality. And I want to emphasize one very important aspect of the diamond trade here in Antwerp: our commitment to the highest standards of transparency, compliance and sustainability, both through the strict implementation of the Kimberley Process Certification Scheme and business self-regulatory schemes. It is my conviction that the political and commercial evolution in that area will push all markets towards these high levels of ethical business-standards. Companies or trade hubs that are not taking this evolution serious will sooner or later be left out by the customers and by the financial institutions. The Antwerp diamond industry and the Belgian Government stand side-by-side in their efforts to maintain these high standards and to promote a level-playing-field for the diamond business worldwide. Our working and controlling methods constitute Antwerp's major competitive advantage.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

During recent economic missions chaired by HRH Princess Astrid, representing HM King Filip, I squeezed the opportunity to meet and discuss with some of you. I am very much looking forward to collaborating further with the diamond industry. And yes, there have been some great achievements in the past. Everyone remembers the diamond boots in Hong Kong, the seminar on the Kimberley Process in Johannesburg or more recently, the B2B-meetings and the Antwerp Diamond Night in Singapore. Of course, it is my hope that we can continue this fruitful collaboration in the future. As for others sectors of our economy, I am at your disposal to help organize and lead specific dedicated missions to diamond producing, manufacturing and / or trading countries to promote Antwerp as a centre of excellence for diamond trade and manufacturing.

However, Ladies and Gentlemen, equally important to me is, if it were lost, to get back the public's support, appreciation and pride for the diamond industry. Yet, this cannot be done without your support. I am in any case fully committed to do my share and make sure that the federal Government will develop further in the coming years a predictable economic, financial and fiscal environment that stimulates business and the diamond business.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

The preliminary figures reveal that 2014 was an excellent year for the international diamond trade in Antwerp. I am confident that together we are able to sustain this steady growth in 2015 and boost, by doing so, the influence and weight of Antwerp in the global diamond business, ... whatever other competitors might want or think.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

To you, your families and loved ones, all the best for 2015 and a very shiny and marvellous New Year!

*Pieter De Crem*

*Secretary of State for Foreign Trade*