

Mr Secretary of State for Foreign Trade,
Fellow diamantaires,
Dear colleagues,

First of all, let me thank you all for joining us today in celebrating the start of the new year. I would also like to take the opportunity to express our gratitude to De Kring's President, Mr Freddy Inzlicht and his board of directors and Director General, for allowing us to welcome the Antwerp diamond community on this marvelous trade floor.

I also warmly welcome our State Secretary of Foreign Trade, Mr Pieter De Crem, as our guest of honor on this New Year Reception.

Mr State Secretary, your recent visit to India underscored the importance of the diamond business in our bilateral trade relationships, not just in reference to trade with India but across the globe. We are happy to see and feel your commitment and support for the Antwerp diamond industry.

Dear colleagues and friends,

Let me be candid. 2014 hasn't been the easiest of years, as many of you can attest to. The world we operate in is changing rapidly. We are facing challenges that can't always be answered by ready-made solutions. In a few days time, at the opening of the Antwerp Diamond Trade Fair, we will be announcing our annual figures. All indications point to a strong year in numbers, contrasting sharply with the sentiment here in these streets. This past year profit margins have reached the level of being non-existent. We are well aware of the extremely difficult circumstances in which our diamantaires are forced to work across the globe.

The announced wind down of the Antwerp Diamond Bank follows the trend of diminished financing that remains a burning issue for our business. There are no quick patches to solve this problem, but we are confident with the help of the Belgian Government, Mr State Secretary, that a solution can be found.

At the AWDC, we are pushing hard to find the correct answers for the fiscal climate, through Carat Tax, reinforcing existing ties with our partners, expanding our trade scope by exploring new markets and much more.

The bottom-line is, that we believe Antwerp, above anything else, can and will demonstrate its resilience. We do however need to – once again – reinvent, redefine and adapt ourselves. Over the past years, together with the bourses, the Antwerp Indian Association and other stakeholders, my board and myself have done precisely that by choosing a clear course forward. Never before were so many new ideas and new initiatives organized; inviting financial institutions to get acquainted with our business, dedicated seminars, B2B events, Antwerp meets Antwerp of the Diamond Bourse..., the Rough Diamond Day of this important institute..., princely and economic missions, seminars and conferences, an innumerable amount of visits by key players from within and outside our industry..., the list is long. These initiatives are the foundation of a transformation that is inevitable.

Dear guests,

Recent events in Brussels, Paris and Verviers have made it painfully and shockingly clear to the public that our society and I mean not just the diamond community, but all Belgian industries can be vulnerable. For us it is not a new feeling. We have been confronted by this situation of threat much longer in Mumbai, Tel Aviv, Antwerp and so forward.

This sentiment is now felt by every citizen, in this city, in our country, in the world. Therefore, we, as a community, more than perhaps anyone else, understand the public's call for action, a plea that has been part of our discourse relentlessly over the past decade.

That is why, in recent years, the AWDC Security Office in collaboration with local and federal authorities, have succeeded in augmenting security levels in a number of domains. I'm thinking of increased awareness and a significantly higher number of reported incidents, identification and apprehension of criminals and augmented cyber-security.

Rest assured your safety and security remain our highest priority! Together with the authorities we will continue to invest in the safety of our community.

I for one, am proud to be able to say we are and remain the only diamond centre in the world where the most diverse mix of origins and beliefs work together in perfect harmony.

What characterizes all of us in the Antwerp diamond community, is precisely that we stand united:

We are Antwerp.

We are Samir, Chaim, Jan, Cheng, Sergei and Ali.

Or to put it in the words that have become the symbol of this unity:

Nous sommes tous diamantaires!

And with those words I want to wish all of you a fruitful, successful, healthy and above all peaceful new year.

Last but not least, it is my honor to pass the floor to our State Secretary of Foreign Affairs, Mr Pieter De Crem.