

Zinc mine to change the face of the Northern Cape

President Cyril Ramaphosa is confident that Vedanta Resources Limited's investment at its Gamsberg zinc mine is a step in the right direction towards changing the fortunes of the Northern Cape.



The new Gamsberg zinc mine is creating jobs in the Northern Cape.

Speaking at the opening of the mine, located near Aggeneys in the Northern Cape, President Ramaphosa said Vedanta has heeded South Africa's call at the inaugural South Africa Investment Conference, in October, calling for investment.

"We are here to say 'thank you' to Vedanta for the enthusiasm with which you have embraced our ambitious investment drive. It is gratifying to see the commitments made at the Investment Conference taking form and shape across our country," he said.

The president thanked the company for its investment in one of the most sparsely populated provinces in the country. The Northern Cape contributes just 2% of South Africa's GDP and has an expanded unemployment rate of around 39%.

"Mining offers an opportunity to fundamentally change this," he said of the province that is rich in manganese, iron ore and diamonds.

"Yet, this province remains underdeveloped," he said, adding that mining in the area can greatly improve employment prospects in the province.

He said it is important to increase investment in mineral beneficiation.

“In this regard, the proposed creation of a smelter-refinery complex in Gamsberg will create opportunities for value-adding zinc beneficiation in the Khai-Ma municipality and beyond,” he said.

The president, who earlier in the day toured the \$400-million facility, together with Mineral Resources Minister Gwede Mantashe and Northern Cape Premier Sylvia Lucas, among others -- said he was impressed with the levels of skills on display at the mine.

“The investments that have already been made here, when taken together with the anticipated investments in further phases, will improve South Africa’s position as a global player in zinc production.

Changing the economic landscape

“Most importantly, this investment will change the economic landscape of this region and will contribute to much-needed social development,” he said.

Last year, Vedanta spent R44m on training and social projects aimed at skills development, health, enterprise development and municipal infrastructure support.

Braving the hot sun, the president engaged miners at the site and also explored the digitalised mine’s laboratory which sported more than one robot.

He said that while technological advancements are necessary, technology cannot replace what human hands can do.

Confidence in the mining sector and investing in communities

The president said the sun has yet to set on the mining sector.

“The operation that we are opening today gives us confidence that the future of mining is bright.

“It gives us confidence that we can develop an industry that benefits communities as much as it produces returns for shareholders,” he said, while adding that government is committed to working with investors to ensure the growth of the sector.

Dean Ramabuya, a process chief superintendent at Vendata, says working at the mine has allowed him to stay with his family, as the company provides housing.

“It’s very comfortable for me and my family. I have no worries for my little one, that she will be in an unsafe environment. The area is very calm. I love it.

“This is one of the biggest, unexplored zinc [mines] in the world. It’s quite exciting. The technology inside this plant is amazing ... I would like to stay with the company for as long as I can... Aggeney’s is also a beautiful place to stay in. The crime rate is very low,” said Ramabuya.

Altus van Zyl, the process superintendent at the mine, said it was one of the most advanced mines he has worked at.

“It gave me a new perspective of all the technology out there and the possibilities that’s out there to enable us to produce more with less energy - so it’s a good thing for the mining industry and South Africa,” he said.

Van Zyl said nearly half of the staff complement is young and from the local community. “So we are growing the community as well.”

His job entails ensuring the production targets are met and the production is of good quality.

“It’s a very nice career. It’s very exciting. It’s a thrill... I enjoy coming here every day, I like challenges and I think most of the people working here love challenges.”

An employee of Van Wyk’s bus service, which operates in the mining area, says the opening of the mine has been good for business.

“This has changed my life. I can now provide for my family... Maybe opportunities can open for me at another big company or the mine itself,” said the man, who is a Gamsberg local.

Embracing technology

The president’s comments were echoed by the mineral resources minister, who said all technologies are anchored on mining.

“Mining must take pride in that and position itself as part of it. This investment is quite important, zinc and copper are found here. That means that we have a number of minerals that are basically industrial minerals that can contribute to the development of the country,” Mantashe said.

Ease of doing business

Meanwhile, Chairman of Vedanta, Anil Argawal, spoke highly of the ease of doing business in the South African mining sector.

“People say it is difficult to do business in South Africa. My own experience was that we never had problems. Everything was done in a proficient manner and delivered on time,” he said.

Empowering women, skills

The company is targeting to include 30% of women in its operations at the mine in the next three years.

At the last stop of his tour of the facility, the president, who founded the National Union of Mineworkers (NUM) with James Motlatsi and Elijah Barayi in the '80s, asked workers at the cafeteria whether they had joined a union - to which workers replied with a "yes."

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