



INTERVIEW TRANSCRIPTION

MR. YOUSSEF AHMAD

General Manager, American Business Investment Construction

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UNIVERSAL NEWS (UN): *Since 1979 the country has progressed as President Obiang promotes measures to implement good governance and transparency. The country's importance inside the Economic & Monetary Community of Central Africa (CEMAC) is crucial. With great events taking place in the country like the African Union summit and the African Cup of Nations, the spotlight is going to be on Equatorial Guinea in the coming years. In your opinion, what changes are taking place in the country?*

MR. YOUSSEF AHMAD (YA): Equatorial Guinea is a country that is metamorphosing. You cannot come to Equatorial Guinea and without noticing the changes taking place. Every time I come here, something new is being built. **The policy that is being implemented by the government today focuses on building new infrastructures like construction and roads, but it is also developing healthcare and education.**

UN: *Equatorial Guinea's fast growth rate is in part due to the diversification taking place in the country, taking the energy sector's profits and investing in key sectors. How would you say investment in the construction sector and its development is helping the country's growth?*

YA: Construction helps national development in many ways. One of them is by training the national workforce; companies see potential in individuals and trains and forms them in order for them to grow and acquire new skills.

UN: *The country and companies here established place great importance in training the local workforce through different programs and initiatives. How do you find the national labor to be?*

YA: The local workforce is willing to learn. You can see they are very enthusiastic and they want to acquire new skills but they still need the appropriate people to guide and lead them towards acquiring these new skills.

UN: *How do you train your staff?*

YA: **Our job is not only based on the construction or architectural aspects, the ones people can see. Our job is to build and construct intelligent buildings.** These buildings have systems installed that require very specific skills and abilities to operate them, systems that can only be seen in hotels, governmental buildings or hospitals. You do not see them in normal houses or even palaces. The construction prior to the development taking place nowadays was very basic.

UN: *And you are taking it to the next level?*

YA: Yes. Besides contributing to developing the country's infrastructure, our aim is to educate the country's youth in order for them to acquire new skills and abilities.

UN: *What is the percentage of local staff and expatriates that work in the company?*

YA: As per law through implementation by the Ministry of Labor, 80% of your staff should be local. But the reality differs. It is very difficult to respect this quota although we try as much as possible to stay inside the margin.

UN: *The goal of the development Plan Horizon 2020, is to develop and promote all sectors of the economy making the country an emerging market by the year 2020. How do you think this new development plan will benefit construction inside the country?*

YA: Amongst the CEMAC countries, Equatorial Guinea is the nation with the most reserves in the Central Bank. The African Summit as well as the African Nations Cup will take place in the country but Equatorial Guinea could not have hosted these events if they didn't have the necessary infrastructure. **It is this new construction that permits them to host these regional and international events.**

UN: *I would like to talk about the recent economic crisis that has hit most sectors on a global scale. Many developed countries are still trying to recover. How has the crisis affected Al Baraka?*

YA: All the materials used in construction and in other businesses as well, are imported. You can rarely find what you need in the local market, let alone the construction industry. The economic crisis has definitely had an impact and companies had to adjust their prices in order to cope with the whole situation. The impact was not immediate, but it has been felt.

UN: *I know that some giants in the construction sector here have had to close their doors due to this crisis but Al Baraka still has great projects in the pipeline, the economic slowdown has had an impact but it has been small.*

YA: Yes, the impact has been small. When the crisis happened I remember the government asked all established companies to meet. We were first told we would be meeting with high-ranking government officials. At that time I was in Malabo so I went to Bata and ended up met with the Head of State himself. All the CEO's met with the President in the conference center in Bata. He told us that the Equatorial Guinean government had been naïve and too flexible with foreign construction companies. They had been eager to bring in companies and start projects as quick as possible in order to implement the development that was needed. Prior to the crisis, companies

would get up to 30% advances on new projects. One of the measures taken due to the crisis states that companies which acquire new markets will not receive advance payments. Each company will be paid according to the executed works.

UN: You have done flagship projects, one of them being the Hilton Hotel as well as many green spaces for some of the most symbolic buildings in the country. Many of the key players in the construction sector are your clients through your quarry Al Baraka SARL. Apart from this you have an electro-mechanic company that installs elevators, security systems and everything that is related to electronics. You touch every aspect of the construction sector. How do you divide your activities?

YA: Our main activity is construction although the quarry has the same importance for us. Construction is directly related to the government and sometimes, we conduct projects where we implement an extensive scope of work because the government needs this particular project for a special event. And although the company has its own prestige to maintain, we sometimes have to invest money in order to respect the delays. Even though you may invest your own money, once the job is delivered, you will get paid. This is why the quarry is so important, it helps immensely the construction company's cash flow, so as not to ask for money back home too often.

UN: What future projects do you have in the pipeline?

YA: Future projects to be implemented are the new municipality of Bata; and we will also be constructing the new Ministry of Finance in Malabo.

UN: Established here since 2004, you play a crucial role in the country's infrastructure and construction development. You have become one of the leading companies throughout the country. How were your beginnings and what were your major milestones in the country?

YA: We were established in the country to conduct the construction of the current Hilton Malabo. The particularity of this project is that most of the plans being done now belong to the government. The Hilton Malabo is a private project although government participation is 40%. They finance that same percentage of the total project as a long term loan, and I must say the introduction of this new montage was a not an easy task.

UN: Al Baraka has become synonym of experience and quality in the construction sector. The country's infrastructure is growing and developing through great projects such as the Hilton Malabo, the Hilton Bata, government-owned buildings as well as green spaces. You have done and are currently doing some great projects for the country. What are your communications strategies in order to promote the brand and the company's name?

YA: I think the biggest communications strategy is the Hilton Malabo; the name speaks for itself.

UN: *You're involved in building hotels, how do you assess the potential of the tourism sector? We know the island and the mainland both have great natural sights and the Ministry of Tourism is willing to expand the sector for eco-friendly and luxury tourism, which Hilton is aligned with. How do you see the development of this sector?*

YA: Until now we haven't felt the development of the tourism sector in Equatorial Guinea, because most of the foreigners you meet are here on business. **The Horizon 2020 Plan will implement tourism among many other sectors.** The nature and sights that exist in the country are incredible; the potential for great tourism exists. Take for example the island of Corisco; the beach there is Paradise.

UN: *The potential that exists here in terms of tourism is incredible but people outside the country have never heard about these places, they don't see the country as a tourism destination.*

YA: They do not know about such spots because for the moment, these places are not ready to receive tourism. They do not have the necessary infrastructure yet, although it is coming rapidly. They are building a new airport in Corisco, before the runway could only receive certain kinds of aircrafts. The infrastructure of the island itself is not ready for tourism but they are working on it.

UN: *So the target of customers that you are hoping to receive here in the short term is basically businessmen?*

YA: Correct, businessmen and oil companies.

UN: *How do you think these hotels in Malabo and Bata, as well as the many others you are building around the country, will improve the tourism sector?*

YA: The hotel will surely contribute to promote national tourism. This is a strategy that needs to be worked on with the representatives of the Hilton brand and representatives of the Ministry of Information and Tourism.

UN: *You are not going to be running the Hilton Hotel?*

YA: No, we are partners in the hotel and we have done the construction, but the hotel will be managed by Hilton. **The aim of getting an international operator such as Hilton is to promote tourism besides promoting the hotel itself as a business.**

UN: I imagine that you have sat down with the Minister of Tourism and he is very much involved in the new image Equatorial Guinea will project thanks to the hotel.

YA: Of course, he is very enthusiastic about the upcoming Hilton.

UN: With regards to the international investment that is growing in Equatorial Guinea, the United States has become the biggest investor in the country. Many companies from various countries around the world are opening their doors in Equatorial Guinea. What opportunities and benefits do you think Al Baraka has to offer foreign investors who are willing to come to the country?

YA: The benefit we offer to foreign investors is quality, the quality of the product we supplied to the market.

UN: Taking the interview to a more personal level, our reports are made from the views and thoughts of the country's most prominent personalities. Could you please tell us about how your past career and experience has helped you lead the company here in Equatorial Guinea?

YA: Not only my past career but my history has helped me as well. The fact that I was born in Europe and have lived in Africa and the Middle East for many years has allowed me to be multicultural. I think I have established myself in Equatorial Guinea and have adapted to the mentality slightly faster than most people.

UN: There is a saying that states that without good leadership, there can be no success. Al Baraka has obviously done very well for itself and great things are still to come. Where does your philosophy and vision come from?

YA: The vision of Al Baraka in the country has been acquired from the behind-the-scenes-people, the ones you do not see. We are here managing and succeeding on their behalf.

UN: I would like to finish the interview with a final message for our audience, politicians and major businessmen throughout the U.S. If you had one message to convey to them about Equatorial Guinea and Al Baraka as a company, what would that message be?

YA: I would like to invite them to come to Equatorial Guinea and assist us in implementing and developing the country.

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