
Unilever signs up for Cuba's special development zone

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Anglo-Dutch consumer products giant Unilever has been authorized by the Cuban government to operate in the Mariel Special Development Zone, or ZEDM, a port and trade complex aimed at luring foreign investment.

Unilever is to form a 60/40 joint venture with Cuban state company Intersuchel, executives of both firms said Monday.

The new company will start production by the end of 2017 to supply the Cuban market with personal-care and home products, including prominent global brands such as Sedal, Lux, Rexona, Omo and Close-Up.

The announcement coincided with a visit to Cuba by the Dutch minister for Foreign Trade and Development Cooperation, Lilianne Ploumen, who expressed confidence that other firms from her country "will be able to settle here and do business with Cuban partners."

Also on hand for the announcement of the new company was the director of the ZEDM support office, Ana Teresa Igarza; the CEO of Unilever Mexico and the Caribbean, Fabio Prado; the head of Intersuchel, Pedro Fraga; and the Dutch ambassador to Cuba, Norbert Braakhuis.

Prado said Unilever is "very satisfied" to return to Cuba, where the company had a presence from 1994 to 2012.

He said Unilever's goal is to "stimulate the economy" in Cuba, with the creation of 300 direct jobs and the introduction of renowned international brands.

Unilever, with annual sales of 50 billion euros (\$54.41 billion) has operations in 190 countries.

Unilever-Intersuchel is the ninth confirmed venture in the ZEDM, which provides favorable tax and labor conditions for foreign firms and is the first space of its kind on the Communist-ruled island.

The port and trade zone, whose centerpiece is a major container terminal, is the only place on the island where foreign companies can set up shop without having to partner with state-owned firms, which otherwise must have at least a 51 percent stake in joint ventures.

Five of the nine future ZEDM tenants are foreign firms who plan to operate without Cuban partners.
