

From: [REDACTED] <[REDACTED]>

To: "jeffrey E." <jeevacation@gmail.com>

Subject: FT TODAY

Date: Sun, 22 Jun 2014 22:37:27 +0000

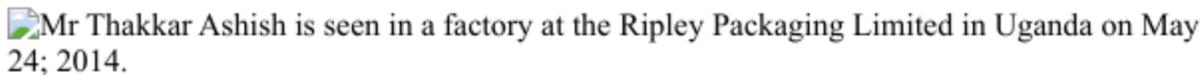
COO and #2

Terrified but need to do it

High quality global journalism requires investment. Please share this article with others using the link below, do not cut & paste the article. See our [Ts&Cs](#) and [Copyright Policy](#) for more detail. Email [REDACTED] to buy additional rights. <http://www.ft.com/cms/s/0/3ab56de2-f55d-11e3-91a8-00144feabdc0.html#ixzz35PQ1gsNk>

Ashish Thakkar: Bob Diamond's African partner

By Javier Blas Author alerts

Mr Thakkar Ashish is seen in a factory at the Ripley Packaging Limited in Uganda on May 24, 2014.

©Isaac Kasamani

Disruptive: Ashish Thakkar wants to shake up African banking but disagrees with criticism of his partner, Bob Diamond

When he was 15 years old, Ashish Thakkar told his parents that he wanted to leave his school in Uganda to build a business. His family gave him a \$5,000 loan, but he recalls receiving a stern warning from his father too: "If it doesn't work out within a year then you go back to school, but you'll be a year behind your friends."

Mr Thakkar, now 32, never went back to study. Instead, the precocious young man spent the mid-1990s criss-crossing the continent to establish Mara Group, an African conglomerate that recently gained greater prominence by linking up with Bob Diamond, the former chief executive of UK bank Barclays.

The teenage Mr Thakkar started out reselling computers, which involved flying to Dubai each weekend to buy motherboards and hard drives that he would shift to customers in Africa. Under his leadership, Mara subsequently diversified into a broad range of activities, including call centres, property and cardboard packaging. It has operations in 22 African countries including Kenya, Uganda, Nigeria and Rwanda.

The company's rise has made Mr Thakkar rich. He values his group at "slightly above" \$1bn. That would make him Africa's youngest dollar billionaire. But detractors and even some friends say that figure is inflated. Speaking at his parents' home on a hill overlooking the Ugandan capital Kampala, he seems unfazed either way: "I don't like the Africa's-youngest-billionaire title."

More

ON THIS STORY

Bob Diamond's Africa fund misses target

Bob Diamond's Africa fund to tap investors

Whatever the truth – and Mara Group does not publish its accounts – Mr Thakkar's success in eastern Africa has increasingly made him a go-to man for investors willing to take on the risks of the region.

Well-known to young Africans addicted to social media – he has 585,000 Twitter followers – Mr Thakkar saw his international profile rise

Diamond steps up charge into Africa

ON THIS TOPIC

Mota-Engil Africa to list on LSE

Glencore arranges \$1bn oil loan for Chad

Avanti to issue bonds for next satellite

Andrew Hill [The legacy of an African web pioneer](#)

THE MONDAY INTERVIEW

Anil Agarwal, executive chairman, Vedanta Resources

Alan Clark, chief executive, SABMiller

Pascal Soriot, chief executive, AstraZeneca

Cao Dewang, Fuyao Glass

were forced to leave Uganda in the early 1970s. He returned to Africa with his family to settle in Kigali, the Rwandan capital, months before the genocide.

Mr Thakkar says the days and nights there remain vivid in his mind – time spent waiting to escape the mass slaughter of approximately 800,000 Tutsi and moderate Hutu by members of the country's Hutu majority in April 1994. "I was 13. I remember everything," he says, recalling what he ate the night the genocide started – "margherita pizza and chips" – and other small details of the days he spent hiding and praying for a rescue.

The CV

Born: August 1981, Leicester, UK

Education: After fleeing the Rwandan genocide in 1994, drops out of school in Uganda at the age of 15 to start his own business with a \$5,000 loan

Career: 1996 Starts trading computer hardware between Uganda and Dubai

2001 Establishes a cardboard corrugation plant in Kampala, Uganda

2006 Diversifies into high-end real estate

2009 Mara Foundation is

after [partnering with Mr Diamond](#) to move into African banking.

The Atlas Mara cash shell, in which both he and Mr Diamond have personally invested, listed on the London Stock Exchange in December, [raising \\$325m](#). In March it announced its first deal, paying \$265m in cash and shares to buy BancABC, a medium-sized lender with operations in Botswana, Mozambique, Tanzania, Zambia and Zimbabwe, and signed another deal to acquire a bank in Rwanda through a privatisation programme.

Atlas Mara more recently has [failed to raise the \\$400m](#) it had targeted for its second fundraising, although people familiar with the deal said it raised in excess of \$300m. Both Mr Diamond and Mr Thakkar invested in the second capital raising.

The pair met a year ago at a mutual friend's party in Cape Town. Another meeting followed in New York and they became partners soon after. Mr Diamond [left Barclays under a cloud](#) in 2012 amid the Libor rate-rigging scandal. Mr Thakkar disagrees with critics who paint Mr Diamond as the embodiment of reckless "casino banking", saying that the two men will be a "positive", albeit "disruptive", force in African banking. The financial services sector needs to emulate the explosive growth in mobile phones in Africa, he adds.

The alliance with the investment banker is in sharp contrast to Mr Thakkar's origins. He was born in 1981 in the English city of Leicester after his parents

were forced to leave Uganda in the early 1970s. He returned to Africa with his family to settle in Kigali, the Rwandan capital, months before the genocide.

After fleeing from Kigali to Bujumbura, the capital of neighbouring Burundi, and from there to Kenya, the family finally resettled in Kampala months later. "My dad took a small loan because we had nothing, literally. I could see that people were avoiding my parents . . . You could see people scared that if we get too close maybe we'll ask for a favour."

It was about that time that Mr Thakkar told his family he wanted to try to build a business, rather than study, after making \$100 reselling a computer to a family friend. He replaced formal education with inspiration from the biographies of "Richard Branson, Warren Buffett, Bill Gates and Ratan Tata".

The first decade of running his interlocking enterprises was not easy. "Every business was leaning on each other and that's how you grow, initially you don't have a choice," he says. "I really took a large risk . . . to fund it I just basically leveraged everything I could."

Mr Thakkar says he bet everything he had twice in 10 years. At one point in 1996, he took a loan from a moneylender in Kampala at an annual interest rate

set up to support young entrepreneurs in Africa
2010-11 Forms IT services joint venture and expands into business process outsourcing
2013 Mara joins forces with Atlas Merchant Capital and lists Atlas Mara on the London Stock Exchange
2014 Atlas Mara announces its first acquisitions: BancABC and the Development Bank of Rwanda
Interests:
Tennis, squash, his spiritual leader Morari Bapu

of 36 per cent. But a mixture of luck and a flair for networking saw him through the storm.

Of course, the wind was blowing in his favour. In the early 2000s, as commodities prices surged and democracy spread across the region, Africa entered into a virtuous cycle of strong economic growth and improved governance: a decade-and-a-half run that has been labelled “Africa rising”.

The young entrepreneur capitalised on this trend and the connections he built. Mara Group now has five main business lines: technology, including investment in IT and call centres; manufacturing, with assets such as packaging production and glass manufacturing; financial services, through its Atlas Mara arm; property, with developments under way in Uganda and Tanzania; and agriculture.

“The past five years we’ve seen phenomenal growth and I envisage that this trend will continue,” he says. The secret ingredient is knowing Africa better than the competition, he asserts.

After years of expansion, the company, which employs more than 10,000 people, is becoming more professional in its structure, although the family remains in firm control and there are no plans for a stock market listing.

Mr Thakkar has hired executives from outside, such as Bradford Gibbs, the former head of investment banking for South Africa at Morgan Stanley, and Sriram Yarlagadda, the former CEO of Warid Telecom for east Africa.

Mr Thakkar remains at the top as “founder”, with his father as chairman. There is no CEO but he rejects the suggestion that he is the boss. “I am not smart enough to be a chief executive,” he laughs. “Maybe I need to get O-levels [old UK secondary school qualifications] first to become a chief executive.”