

India-Bhutan ties model for bilateral relations: PM

Describing India's ties with Bhutan as a 'model of inter-state relations', Prime Minister Manmohan Singh said his two-day visit beginning Friday would reinforce that relationship with the Himalayan nation - South Asia's youngest democracy.

The prime minister left Thursday for the state visit, during which he will address the first joint session of the newly-elected Bhutanese parliament.

'The India-Bhutan relationship is a model of inter-state relations. We enjoy open borders and free trade between our two countries,' Singh said on the eve of his departure.

'I am confident that my visit, coming at a time when Bhutan moves toward a new democratic system of governance, will reinforce this unique relationship and that we will continue to work together for the economic benefit and prosperity of our two peoples,' he said.

He pointed out that India has been giving assistance to Bhutan's five-year plans since 1951.

'The hydropower sector has emerged as an area of win-win cooperation for both countries,' said Singh.

Foreign Secretary Shivshankar Menon said Wednesday that the prime minister's trip will give an impetus to one of India's major imports - electricity. He will dedicate the 1,020 MW Tala hydro-electric project, built with India's assistance, and lay the foundation of the 1,095 MW Punatsangchhu hydro-electric project in Bhutan.

Manmohan Singh said the visit had 'special significance' as it marked the centenary of the Wangchuck dynasty, formal coronation ceremony of Jigme Khesar Namgyel Wangchuck as the king and the installation of the first ever democratically elected government in Bhutan.

The visit also falls on the 50th year since Jawaharlal Nehru's historic visit to Bhutan and marks the first anniversary of the India-Bhutan Friendship Treaty.

Singh will hold talks with the previous king, Jigme Singye Wangchuck, and his son and the present monarch, 28-year-old Jigme Khesar Namgyel Wangchuck. He will also meet his Bhutanese counterpart, Jigme Thinley, and discuss with him a host of issues, including India's development cooperation with Bhutan.

India is not only Bhutan's main development partner but also its leading trade partner, and has undertaken a slew of infrastructure development projects in Bhutan, which include building roads in the mountainous nation of 700,000 people.

The prime minister will be accompanied by National Security Advisor M.K. Narayanan, his Principal Secretary T.K. Nair, Foreign Secretary Shivshankar Menon and other senior officials.

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