

## India, Brunei to deepen economic, cultural links

Haji Hassanal Bolkiah, the Sultan of oil-rich Brunei Darussalam, arrived here Tuesday evening on a four-day visit during which the two countries will ink four agreements on deepening their economic and cultural links.

The sultan arrived here in a special Boeing 747 on his first visit to India in over a decade.

After a ceremonial reception at the forecourt of the Rashtrapati Bhavan presidential palace Wednesday morning, the sultan will head for Prime Minister Manmohan Singh's official 7 Race Course Road residence for a luncheon meeting.

After bilateral discussions, the two leaders will witness the signing of a Bilateral Investment and Protection Agreement (BIPA) and three other pacts in the spheres of information and communication technology, trade and economic cooperation and culture.

On Wednesday, the sultan will also meet Vice President Mohammad Hamid Ansari, Finance Minister P. Chidambaram, Defence Minister A.K. Antony and Congress president Sonia Gandhi.

President Pratibha Patil will host a banquet in the sultan's honour at Rashtrapati Bhavan Wednesday evening.

The sultan will also travel to Bangalore, where he will visit the Indian Space and Research Organisation (ISRO) and some IT establishments.

According to officials, Brunei is likely to ask India to reduce import duties on oil and gas as part of proposed free trade agreement between India and the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN).

A member of the 10-nation ASEAN, Brunei has actively backed India's inclusion as a full dialogue partner in the regional grouping.

Brunei, with its vast reserves of oil and gas, accounts for one of the highest living standards in the world.

Bilateral trade between India and Brunei has more than doubled to \$200 million in the last five years. Oil and gas account for over 80 percent of India's imports from Brunei.

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