

President Mukherjee arrives in Papua New Guinea on 1st leg of his 2-nation tour

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Port Moresby (PNG): With a focus on developing strong relations with Pacific Island nations, President Pranab Mukherjee on Thursday arrived in the capital of Papua New Guinea here, the first ever visit by an Indian head of state since India established diplomatic ties with the country in 1975.

Mukherjee arrived here this morning on the first leg of his two-nation visit and was given a warm welcome. He was received by Deputy Prime Minister of PNG Leo Dion.

The President inspected a guard of honour as a 21-gun salute was accorded to him.

The visit of the President is seen as a diplomatic move to counter China's growing influence in the Pacific Island nations. Before his departure from India, his press secretary Venu Rajamony had said the visit was a natural extension of India's 'Look East' policy.

Â Â Â India is looking to enter the health market of the island nation. Ahead of his visit here, the Indian government had approved the signing of an agreement between the two countries, seeking cooperation in the field of healthcare and medical sciences.

The pact will encourage cooperation between the Health Ministries of both the nations through joint initiatives in the sector.

The visit is likely to give push to Indian pharmaceutical companies to set up businesses in the Pacific nation after the local government withdrew a ban in January.

With a population of 7.38 million, diseases like HIV and AIDS are listed as quite rampant in this Pacific nation. The life expectancy in the country is also less because of high cost of medical care.

Mukherjee, on April 30, will travel to New Zealand as part of the second leg of his tour. India and New Zealand will explore prospects for cooperation in agriculture, dairy, food processing, education and skill development as well as high technology during the visit.

New Zealand Prime Minister John Key had visited India in 2011 and its governor general in 2008, 2009 and 2011. The last high-level visit from India to New Zealand was by then prime minister Rajiv Gandhi in 1986.

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