

Tokyo, Sep 1 (AP) - Japanese government and business leaders pledged support Monday for visiting Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi's effort to modernize his country's economy.

Modi is visiting Japan with a delegation of more than a dozen Indian tycoons, seeking to take still relatively low-key ties between the countries to a "new level."

Prime Minister Shinzo Abe took the rare step of traveling to the ancient city of Kyoto over the weekend to host and dine with Modi. The two leaders, who have exchanged affectionate greetings via their Twitter feeds, were shown in a bear hug.

India is keen to gain more support for ambitious energy and construction projects, including high-speed railways. In a speech to Japanese business leaders Modi promised to set up a team to facilitate such efforts and streamline the bureaucracy that has slowed progress in the past. Since taking office three months ago, Modi has traveled to neighboring Nepal and Bhutan and attended a summit of the BRICS emerging nations - Brazil, Russia, India and China. He helped launch an effort to open bank accounts for the poor in India and has set up an investigative team to look into corruption. Meanwhile, the economy has picked up pace in what some analysts are calling the "Modi bounce."

"When I became prime minister, there were high expectations. Not just high expectations, but people expected speed in decisions," Modi told leaders of Japan's five big business groups. "I give you the assurance that what we have done in the past 100 days, the results will be seen very quickly."

In a gesture toward his golf-loving Japanese hosts - Abe golfs frequently - Modi boasted of having beefed up the links in Gujarat, where he was chief minister for years before becoming prime minister in May.

"I felt that as a government, to facilitate Japanese visitors to the state, among other things we developed golf courses," he said, drawing enthusiastic applause.

Japan and India are also beefing up cooperation on security, with an eye toward China's growing assertiveness in the region.

Modi and Abe will release a statement later Monday after their formal summit meeting in Tokyo. Earlier in the day, Modi paid a visit to a Japanese kindergarten and reiterated his desire to incorporate Japanese educational techniques in India's schools.

Japanese businesses are increasingly looking to expand trade and investment in fast-growing Southeast Asia and India.

"We are quite confident that under the leadership of Prime Minister Modi the Japan-India relationship will develop to levels that properly reflect the economic standing of the two nations," Akio Mimura, head of the Japanese Chamber of Commerce and Industry, said in a toast to Modi after his speech.

Nippon Life Insurance Co., the world's largest life insurer, announced plans Monday to launch several investment funds with its Indian partner Reliance Group, pledging to expand their collaboration.

Apart from equity and bond funds, the two companies said they would participate in India's "financial inclusion" program, aimed at expanding services to individuals and small businesses in India, where half the 1.2 billion people do not have bank accounts.