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NARENDRA MODI

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DONALD TRUMP

Namaste Trump

Trump hails 'exceptional' Modi at huge India rally



Agencies | Ahmedabad, India

US President Donald Trump received a red-carpet welcome in the world's biggest democracy yesterday, addressing a huge rally at a mega cricket stadium on a maiden official visit to India where he promised "an incredible trade deal" and "the most feared military equipment on the planet".

Indians wore cardboard Trump masks and "Namaste Trump" hats to welcome the US president at the huge new Motera stadium in Prime Minister Narendra Modi's own political homeland, the western city of Ahmedabad.

Modi embraced Trump as he stepped off Air Force One, along with his wife, Melania.

Folk dancers carrying colourful umbrellas danced alongside the red carpet as drummers, trumpeters and other musicians performed at the airport to welcome Trump and the U.S. delegation. Crowds lined the route along his cavalcade, many taking pictures on their phones.

In Modi's home state of Gujarat, Trump and First Lady

Melania visited independence hero Mahatma Gandhi's ashram, where Modi gifted him a "see no evil, hear no evil, speak no evil" three wise monkeys statue.

The billionaire and the tea seller's son then headed to a new cricket stadium -- the biggest in the world -- where Trump heaped praise on Modi as an "exceptional leader, a great champion of India" in front of a crowd of around 100,000.

"America loves India. America respects India, and America will always be faithful and loyal friends to the Indian people," Trump told the ecstatic crowd, many in Trump-emblazoned baseball caps.

"You have done a great honour to our country. We will remember you forever, from this day onwards India will always hold a special place in our hearts," Trump said to thunderous applause.

"As we continue to build our defence cooperation, the United States looks forward to providing India with some of the best and most feared military equipment on the planet," Trump said.

A new chapter

"President Trump's visit opens a new chapter in our relationship -- a chapter that will document the progress and prosperity of the people of America and India," Modi said.

"The whole world knows what President Trump has done to fulfil the dreams of America."

In his speech Trump extolled India's rise as a stable and prosperous democracy as one of the achievements of the century. "You have done it as a tolerant country. And you have done it as a great, free country," he said.

India is one of the few big countries in world where Trump's personal approval rating is above 50%. It has built up ties with the United States in recent years as Washington's relationship has become strained with India's foe Pakistan.

Excited spectators had queued from 4:00 am for the "Namaste Trump" rally, reciprocating a "Howdy Modi" event in Houston last year where Trump likened Modi to Elvis.

"Events like these will galvanise people to start to cooperate in new initiatives," said Pramit

Maakoday, an Indian-American in the stadium.

Later yesterday Trump and Melania -- dressed in an off-white jump suit and Indian sash alongside her husband in his usual suit and tie -- flew to the Taj Mahal for sunset before the main official talks on Tuesday.

Parts of the white marble "jewel of Muslim art", according to UNESCO, were given a mud-pack facial to remove stains, while efforts were made to lessen the stench of the adjacent river.

Children lined the route cheering and waving flags as his convoy drove past.

Trump and Melania posed for pictures at the Taj, the 17th century monument to love. "It's incredible," he told reporters.

Trump, who faces his own re-election campaign this year, has frequently praised Modi for his crowd-pulling power.

"Very tough negotiator"

The two sides did not manage to hammer out a trade deal ahead of the visit, with differences remaining over agriculture, medical devices, digital

trade and proposed new tariffs. Trump said he was going to discuss economic ties with Modi, describing him as a tough negotiator.

"We will be making very, very major, among the biggest ever made, trade deals. We are in the early stages of discussion for an incredible trade agreement to reduce barriers of investment between the United States and India," he said.

"And I am optimistic that working together, the prime minister and I can reach a fantastic deal that's good and even great for both of our countries -- except that he is a very tough negotiator."

"There is so much that we share, shared values and ideals ... shared opportunities and challenges, shared hopes and aspirations," said Modi at the rally.

Rather than a wide-ranging trade deal, reports said Trump and Modi may instead sign smaller agreements covering products such as Harley-Davidson motorcycles and US dairy products.

"We are in the early stages of discussions for an incredible

trade agreement," Trump told the rally, calling Modi a "very tough negotiator".

Defence deals

The two men were expected to sign a number of defence deals during the visit, and to discuss the supply of six nuclear reactors.

Trump said the two countries will sign deals on Tuesday to sell military helicopters worth \$3 billion and that the United States must become the premier defence partner of India, which relied on Russian equipment during the Cold War. It was reported earlier that India has cleared the purchase of 24 helicopters from Lockheed Martin worth \$2.6 billion.

Russia, however, remains India's biggest supplier in arms, with India having agreed to buy Moscow's \$5.4-billion S-400 missile defence system despite the threat of US sanctions.

The US has pressured India to stop buying Iranian oil, while US businesses have raised concerns over New Delhi's plans to force foreign firms to store Indian consumers' personal data inside the country.