India is emerging as a new frontier for South Florida business.

The south Asian nation is opening to foreign investment, boosting patent protections and solidifying its base in information technology, executives active in India said Wednesday.

As a result, South Florida companies are expanding into the fast-growing nation of 1.1 billion people. New ventures include Fort Lauderdale-based Wireless Logix Group helping set up telecom systems to bring distance-learning to schools in rural India, and Miami-based Brightstar Corp. distributing cell phones in Mumbai, formerly known as Bombay.

The closer ties were clear Wednesday, when about 100 executives showed up at 8 a.m. for a panel on India organized by Coral Gables-based publisher WorldCity Media. Many in the audience turned out to be busy in India already.

Jose de la Torre, dean of Florida International University's business school, for instance, said he's on the board of Mumbai's Mphasis, a software company that grew from seven employees in 1999 to 15,000 today. And Mike Singh, chief of Miami-based Telkom Caribe, said he's working with India's Bharti Telecom, which now boasts 17 million cell-phone subscribers.

The links come as India opens its long-closed market, helping spur its economy to grow 6 percent a year since 1990 and its middle class to reach 300 million people -- equal to the entire U.S. population.

India's government now welcomes foreign investors and allows them to take profits out, reversing socialist policies of the 1960s that sought to keep foreign currency in the country and required partnerships with Indian firms, said Mateen Husami, senior counsel for pharmaceutical maker Abbott Laboratories of Abbott Park, Ill.

But challenges remain. While India's notorious bureaucracy is modernizing, it still takes roughly 83 days to set up a business, compared with 21 days in South Korea and 48 in China, Husami said.

"You have to have patience in India," Husami warned.

And unlike China, where the government has been building highways, ports and other basics at lightning speed, India lags in infrastructure.

Plans for a new international airport in Bangalore, for example, have
been on the drawing board for years. Indian companies now are pushing for public-private partnerships to help address infrastructure needs, said Miami executive Syed Naveed, who works with his family's business in India, Shirkat Advanced Precision Engineering Inc. of Bangalore.

Still, the gains attract growing interest. Last year, India displaced the United States as the second favorite destination for foreign direct investment after China, said WorldCity Publisher Ian McCluskey, citing a survey from consultants A.T. Kearney.

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