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Bhopal gas tragedy victims return to PM with a reminder

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Two years ago, a group of people from Bhopal walked down to Delhi seeking a meeting with Prime Minister Manmohan Singh for a rehabilitation package for Bhopal gas tragedy survivors. The result was the formation of a coordination committee to settle rehabilitation issues of the victims. It was the first such initiative by the UPA government for a problem that is 25 years old.

Today, two years later, the coordination committee is a failure and a group of 60 people from Bhopal have returned once again to Delhi, walking 850 km in the hope of meeting the PM to inform him that the committee formed through his intervention has failed miserably.

The coordination committee achieved nothing in the three meetings it held since the time it was set up, says Madhumita Dutta a member of the panel from the International Campaign for Justice in Bhopal. The committee chaired by a joint secretary of the ministry of chemicals has members from the Madhya Pradesh government and the Centre apart from representatives of survivor groups of Bhopal.

It was just a facade, with neither funds nor powers to create an action plan and implement it. It was meant to pacify all concerned, says Dutta.

An example of the inefficacy of the panel is the conclusion of one of the earlier meetings, which said that the government of Madhya



Bhopal gas tragedy survivors on way to Delhi

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Pradesh must prepare an action plan on economic rehabilitation by December 2006. But it is March 2008 and the plan is nowhere to be seen, says Dutta.

The Bhopal survivors are today reiterating their original demand for a proper commission on Bhopal that will actually have the powers and the wealth to implement a rehabilitation package for the people of Bhopal in terms of healthcare, pensions and other measures.

The group has so far faced failure in getting even an appointment from 7 Race Course Road. It has now sent a memorandum to the PMO asking a string of questions. But there are no answers coming their way any soon.

Recall survivors who are

camping in Delhi for a hearing from the PMO: "Last time, the Bhopalis tried for an appointment in 2006, it took them 33 days of walking, 16 days of dharna in Delhi and meetings with several people, including Sonia Gandhi, Rahul Gandhi, Left parties and Oscar Fernandes before the PM agreed to meet them. This time we have started meeting the various leaders in advance."

The activists are bitter. Says Nityanand Jayaraman of International Campaign for Justice in Bhopal: "The government will eagerly set up an Investment Commission to facilitate investment by the likes of Dow Chemicals, which took over Union Carbide operations in India, but when people in Bhopal want a rehabilitation commission,

it is not interested. It gives a toothless body that can do nothing but see requests shuttled between state, Centre and the victims."

The marchers are coming here to remind the PM of his own assurances to the Bhopal victims in 2006.

The Bhopal activists had then asked for a rehabilitation commission on Bhopal and legal action against Dow Chemicals.

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