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'Build us homes, or let us build'

Slum dwellers' delegation gives govt a demand draft of Rs 2,000 seeking lease of a 50-acre plot in Mankhurd

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Mumbai's squatters want to turn developers in 2008. And, they are serious about it.

On Wednesday, a delegation of slum dwellers, led by National Alliance of People's Movement activist Medha Patkar, called on minister of state for housing Rajesh Tope and handed him a demand draft of Rs2000 drawn in the name of chief minister Vilasrao Deshmukh. In return, they demanded allotment of a 50-acre plot at Mandala, Mankhurd, on an 80-year lease for building houses for the poor.

The rate offered, Rs 40 per acre, was 100 times more than a bid accepted by the state while allowing development on a 230-acre plot in Powai to Hiranandani developers in 1986, claimed Patkar. The Powai land, belonging to 17 private owners, was leased to the developer as an exemption under the now repealed Urban Land Ceiling and Regulation Act (ULCRA). It came with a rider: that it should be used for constructing affordable houses of 400 sq-ft and 800 sq-ft. The state was to take control of 15 per cent of the houses. However, it was not known whether the conditions were met.

Patkar said that her organisation would abide by all terms and conditions set by the state. "When the government can allot land at such nominal rates to rich builders and developers, it should also extend the same largesse to us. In fact, we have agreed to pay 100 times more," she said.

Earlier, more than 2000 slum dwellers protested at the Azad Maidan against the state's "anti poor" policies. The morcha, named '*Ghar Bachao, Ghar Banao Andolan*' and led by Patkar and Mrinal Gore of Nagari Nivara Hakk Parishad, criticised the government decision to repeal ULCRA. "It will only open 30,000 acres of land for the developers at the expense of the poor, who earlier were entitled to get houses built on these lands," said Patkar.

The protestors urged the state to take control of the freed land and make use of it for construction of affordable housing. They even offered that if it was not possible for the government to build such houses, then they would take the plots on lease and develop them.

"We will construct the houses," said Patkar.

Gore claimed that her organisation, which developed 6000 houses ranging between Rs3-6 lakh in Malad, had shown that this could be done.

The protestors criticised the "anti-slum" policies of the state and issued a memorandum of various demands. Tope sought time until January 8 to revert back to them.



Medha Patkar addresses the protestors at Azad Maidan on Wednesday
-Kamiesh pechkar/DNA

Protestors' demands

Demolition of all post-2000 slums be stalled

State should utilise land freed under ULCRA to build low-cost houses for the poor

If the government can't do it, it should lease out plots to slum dwellers, who would develop their own housings

'It was my own land'

Niranjan Hiranandani, managing director of Hiranandani Developers, said, "The land under question was not owned by the state government. It was my own land. Other areas like Oshiwara too have been developed, seeking exemptions under ULCRA. If one questions the allotment made to me, then similar projects too should be looked into. I have abided by the terms and conditions of the contract... The ULCRA has been repealed to encourage private players to construct mass housing. It is for the state cabinet to decide on what to do with Medha Patkar's offer."