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Sparring govt agencies unable to evict

Homeless since 26/7, disabled hijack bldg



Occupants of the four-storey building standing guard over their homes

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MUMBAI

July 24: Three years after their houses were destroyed in the floods of July 26, a group of disabled people have taken their fight to the government by forcibly occupying a building over which two wings of the government are slugging it out in court.

On Thursday, a couple of days before the third anniversary of the July 26 floods of 2005, around 60 families took possession of a four-storey building which was unoccupied since 1991. The Brihanmumbai Municipal Corporation (BMC) and the Maharashtra Housing And Area Development Authority (MHADA) went to court with both parties claiming ownership of the building.

The group calling themselves the July 26 Apang Utkarsh Sahkari Grahkul Sangha had even invited a *pandit* to conduct *pujas* as

they made their entry into the building.

"It has been three years and nothing has happened. That is when we thought of this. We know it is wrong and illegal but we want the government to hear us," said Mr Ram Patankar, president of the Brihan Maharashtra Apang Vikas Sangathana (BMAVS).

The BMAVS had collected details of 365 families of disabled people that had lost their houses in the July 26 floods. It had managed to get letters from the Union government asking the collector and BMC commissioner to allocate houses to these people.

The building, because of its "in limbo" status does not have electricity or water nor does it have any sort of government documentation.

Local goons had blocked the entrance with sand bags for all these years and only allowed their own people to enter the building. They relented when this group of



disabled people approached them.

"I have been running from one government office to the other for so many years that when I got an opportunity to stay here, I simply opted for it. It is better than sleeping at railway stations and then having to move out in the middle of the night when the police ask us to leave," said Mr Nandlal Mishra, a vendor at a railway station whose Virar house was destroyed by the July 26 floods.