

'Cockroach' protests have Indian leaders scurrying to talks

India

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Talks between young protesters in India and the government have been cordial, but the stalemate continues over their demand that the education minister should resign.

Two representatives of the "cockroach" protest movement — the largest India has seen in recent years — met JP Nadda, the health minister, and Jitendra Singh, the minister of state, in Delhi yesterday. After the talks the

group said the government appeared amenable to two of their demands but not the central one: that the education minister, Dharmendra Pradhan, should resign.

The so-called Cockroach Janata Party (CJP) has demanded that Pradhan take moral responsibility for an examination paper leak in May that forced two million students to resit and has been linked to a dozen suicides. Both sides said talks would continue today.

For the first time since the movement began, Narendra Modi, the prime min-

ister, directly addressed protesters by promising stringent action on exam paper leaks.

In a rare recorded video message posted to X late on Thursday night, Modi acknowledged the crowds who have been protesting at Jantar Mantar in Delhi since June 6.

"Friends, I know that paper leak is not an ordinary issue. It is very painful for lakhs [hundreds of thousands] of students and their families," Modi said.

He repeated his earlier promise to set up fast-track courts to punish those

leaking questions. About a dozen people have been arrested for the latest leak and a minister from the ruling Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) said he was "shocked" to discover that some of them were those entrusted with setting the questions.

The CJP, which began as a satirical online campaign, took its name after a judge called some unemployed youths "cockroaches" and attracted support from disaffected young Indians from all sections of society. There is no sign of the massive crowds at Jantar Mantar,

where a sit-in has been taking place, thinning out, despite the sweltering heat. Donations of food have been pouring in from all over India. Teenagers have travelled from towns a long way away and children have missed school to participate.

Sonam Wangchuk, an activist who was on a hunger strike for 26 days in support of the movement, agreed to call it off after BJP ministers reassured him no protester would face legal action over clashes with police in Delhi on Monday.