

NGO wants land for national autism centre

EXPRESS NEWS SERVICE
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ACTION for Autism (AFA), an NGO working with autistic children, organised a Walk for Autism at the India Gate lawns today.

More than 150 autistic children, their parents and volunteers joined the walk which was flagged off by film actress Nandita Das. The walkers were scheduled to meet the President but the appointment was cancelled for security reasons. The walk was held as part of the India Autism Week, a week-long campaign across the country which began on December 14.

Autism, a life-long neurological disability affecting the social and communicative skills of a person, affects one in every 500 people but its exact cause is not known. Genetics, foetal development snags, metabolic processes are thought to play a part in causing damage to the brain leading to autism.

A national medical conference was organised as part of the Week at which doctors and experts from London, Mumbai and Bangalore answered a range of questions on autism. Groups and organisations working with autistic children all over the country have cooperated with the AFA to organise the Week. It is for the first time that a week-long campaign is being held on autism.

"Other than spreading awareness, AFA is also focusing on our fight for land to build a National Centre for Autism. The centre will train teachers and parents and have diagnostic and rehabilitation services," Merry Barua, AFA's di-

rector, said. The AFA will give a memorandum to the President for allocating land.

The lack of trained professionals results in many autistic children not getting timely and accurate di-

agnosis and consequently not getting appropriate intervention. "This has often resulted in sending such kids to schools of mentally retarded. But autistic children should be given different and sepa-

rate caring," said Ashwini Chaswal, one of the trustees of AFA.

As part of the Week, a four-day exhibition of paintings by autistic people will begin at the India

Habitat Centre from December 19. The last event of the campaign, on December 23, is a day-long talk for parents and professionals by Dr. Zenobia Sharma, a London-based expert.



Actress Nandita Das at the Walk for Autism on Sunday. Newline photo by RAVI BATRA