

Activists, Opposition protest as 'encounter killings' rise in TN; cops justify gun use

PUCL says there have been 18 encounters since DMK came to power in 2021; activists, Opposition up in arms while police say each one was done in self-defence

Pramila Krishnan | 28 Sept 2024 1:39 PM (Updated:28 Sept 2024 2:00 PM)

When one talks about extrajudicial killings, Tamil Nadu is not a state that immediately comes to mind, but of late, it has been coming under the scanner after a spurt in what is colloquially called "encounter killings".

With the most recent killing of a member of an ATM robbery gang from Haryana

in an alleged police encounter by the Tamil Nadu Police, the number of encounters in the state has shot up to 18 since the DMK came to power in 2021. Earlier, during the AIADMK regime, between May 2016 and May 2021, there were 17 encounters.

People's Union for Civil Liberties (PUCL) general secretary V Suresh told The Federal, "There is no difference between the two political parties (DMK and AIADMK). Both give an open ticket to the police to conduct encounters and then close the case. Encounters also mean that the police machinery is not willing to conduct a complete investigation and want to close the case."

Human rights activists and Opposition parties are up in arms, slamming the ruling DMK regime for the significant rise in police encounters in the state.

FIR against "encounter specialist"

Advocate and human rights activist Henri Tiphagne said the Madras High Court (Madurai Bench), in a significant move on September 27, ordered that an FIR has to be filed against retired police officer S Velladurai in a case involving an encounter in 2010. Known as the "encounter specialist" of Tamil Nadu, Velladurai was part of the Special Task Force (STF) that gunned down the dreaded forest brigand Veerappan and was subsequently involved in several encounter cases.

"The high court has now ordered the police department to file an FIR without delay. This judgment is significant, as it can probably help stop the sudden increase in the number of encounters in the state," he said.

Inquiry into encounters

Henri Tiphagne had earlier filed a petition in the Madras High Court requesting for the setting up of a Judicial Commission to probe alleged encounter deaths in the state but his plea was dismissed.



However, the activist suggested that the state government should initiate a mandatory domestic inquiry into each encounter and direct the police to file FIRs in every encounter killing that happens in the state. "In several cases, police claim that they shot suspects or rowdies because there was a threat to their lives. But only when there is a detailed investigation into the encounter can we get the real picture and the reasons for the encounter. We cannot justify every encounter, and the numbers are increasing every month now," he added.

Barring Juman (40), the man killed in the ATM robbery heist case, the others who died in encounters in the state were mainly involved in criminal cases and were history sheeters; some had been involved in heinous crimes and murders.

Last resort

Former TN DGP M Ravi, however, supported the police force and felt encounters are the "last resort".

Talking to The Federal, he said, "This armed gang of robbers from Haryana used Google Maps to locate SBI ATMs in various places and tampered with the machines to steal cash. The Namakkal police caught the robbers when they were trying to escape in a container vehicle. They also had weapons and attacked the police."

TN Police justification

The Tamil Nadu Police also justifies each encounter killing stating that it was done in self-defence. In the case of the encounter of the suspect in the ATM heist, police officials claimed that the encounter couldn't be avoided, as the gang was armed and police officials were attacked during the chase. They said two police officers who sustained injuries in the attack were undergoing treatment in Coimbatore.

One suspect was killed on the spot where the gang left the container truck, and six others were arrested after the incident. The police said the gang was trying to escape in a container truck with around Rs 65 lakh in cash stolen in multiple ATM break-ins in Kerala in recent weeks.

During the press briefing, Salem DIG ES Uma said the officers had issued warnings to the gang, who were not ready to listen and attacked the police team.

"To protect themselves, they shot one person, but the other six were caught and are now in our custody. We made every effort to arrest them, but there was a threat to the lives of the police personnel," she said.

The DIG also stated that the gang drove the container in a haphazard manner and even injured people on the road. "The encounter was not our focus. We tried patiently, issued warnings, and even then they were not ready to surrender. When our personnel were at risk, they shot a suspect to avoid further risks," she added.

<https://thefederal.com/category/states/south/tamil-nadu/activists-opposition-protest-as-encounter-killings-rise-in-tn-cops-justify-gun-use-147249?infinitemscroll=1>