

Thoothukudi under siege after another death in Sterlite protest

Police beat a protestor demanding closure of Vedanta's Sterlite Copper unit in Thoothukudi (Tuticorin) Tamil Nadu on Wednesday, May 23. One person was killed during the clash, after police's open fire killed at least 10 people on May 22, and injured

Thoothukudi continues to be in the grip of fear as a young man was killed in a fresh round of firing by the police on Wednesday, May 23. Visuals of cops dragging his body became viral on social media

Since May 22, 2018, that will perhaps go down in Tamil Nadu's history as one of the darkest days ever, Thoothukudi remains under siege. The town, also known as Tamil Nadu's Pearl City and to which the state owes over 70% of its salt production, has been in the news for wrong reasons for months now.

On May 22, when the protest against the polluting Sterlite industry entered into its 100th day, the protestors decided to mark it by taking out a rally towards the District Collectorate, demanding that the industry be closed. The tens of thousands of protestors were defying a ban issued the previous day by Collector N Venkatesh (who was subsequently transferred) in doing so. Braving the police attempts to thwart the rally, including opening tear gas and lathi charge, the rally marched towards the District Collectorate, where the police flouted all norms to open fire and kill at least 11 protestors.

While Tamil Nadu DGP TK Rajendran in a statement claimed that the police concluded the 'mob was anti-social and the violence unleashed by them necessitated shooting', Henry Tiphagne, executive director of People's Watch who was present at the rally, discounts the theory. "The rally only tried to enter the Collectorate and even while doing so they had to pass the Sterlite residential quarters. But when entering the Collectorate, the protestors did not attack the quarters. It is when police opened fire, the protestors retaliated" he says.

It is not the first time that Sterlite and protest against the industry has been mired in controversies. Since its setting up in 1996, Sterlite Copper has been facing the wrath of the locals for polluting the locality. Incidentally, the copper smelter complex was shifted to Thoothukudi from Ratnagiri in Maharashtra after the public protested against it. Trouble erupted again in Thoothukudi when Sterlite announced its expansion plans. Since February, the villagers of Kumarettiyapuram have been protesting, demanding that the expansion plan be stopped and the first plant be closed.

On April 9 2018, the Tamil Nadu Pollution Control Board (TNPCB) rejected Sterlite's application to renew consent to operate the first plant which expired in March 2018. On May 23, the Madurai Bench of Madras High Court stayed the expansion of Sterlite and insisted

on a public hearing before expansion. On May 24 after two days of firing, TNPCB directed that power supply to Sterlite be cut off. The TNPCB said the “the order of closure and disconnection of power supply was issued since it was found out that the unit was carrying out activities to resume production operation” despite the expiry of licence.

The protesters however continued to protest since they had no word from the government on stopping Sterlite operations completely. “Throughout our protest, there was no communication from the State government on their stand towards Sterlite. After firing, a Minister says they intend to close Sterlite down. Of course he also said the firing was inevitable” a protester says.

The organisers of the protest had planned a rally towards collectorate to mark its 100th day on May 22 . “It was never intended to be violent though the district administration had already warned some of the protesters not to take part in the rally. They have told them in a peace meeting on May 20 that the rally could turn violent,” says one of the protesters.

Activists suggest that the firing could be pre-planned to ‘do away with the organisers who were in the forefront.’ “Thamizharasan of Revolutionary Youth Front has been protesting against the Sterlite since its setting up in 1996. His role in organising the hundred day struggle was crucial. I was next to him when the police shot him point blank on his forehead. It was evident that police had singled him out to kill him,” says Uthiram, of Revolutionary Youth Front in Thoothukudi.

Valarmathi, a relative of Thamizharasan, says there were attempts to force him for a compromise. “People had approached him with various kinds of offers to stop him from protesting against Sterlite. I don’t for a moment doubt that he would have been killed because he was always active in the protest.” Sources say Thamizharasan’s family were threatened to receive the body when they had refused to do so. “The cops took away Thamizharasan’s brother and threatened to kill him if his family refused to receive the body” says Uthiram.

Thoothukudi locals say Sterlite protest organisers were gunned down by police

In a case filed by Advocate R Sankara Subbu, the Madras High Court has ordered that the bodies of the deceased be preserved until further orders. The case in which the petitioner has demanded that the government be directed to hold an enquiry by Principal District and Sessions Judge will come up for hearing on May 30. “This is cold-blooded, predetermined murder. The firing has been deliberately done flouting all norms to kill the organisers” Sankara Subbu says.

Locals say that along with Thamizharasan, three more organisers—Snowlin, Maniraj and Gladston—were also gunned down by the police in the firing. “They want to kill the protests. That is why this has happened” says Uthiram.

Meanwhile, Thoothukudi continued to be in a grip of fear as 22-year-old Kaaliyappan was killed in a fresh round of firing by the police on May 23. The visuals of cops dragging his body and one of them kicking him with boots became viral on social media.

While transferring the district collector and SP, the State government also issued orders to cut off internet for five days in three districts including Thoothukudi, Tirunelveli and Kanyakumari in a 'bid to control rumors.' But activists do not buy the government logic. "It is clear that the government does not want the world to know what is likely to happen in Thoothukudi. We have already been hearing that many people have been indiscriminately arrested" says G Sundarrajan of Poovulagin Nanbargal, an environmental organisation in Tamil Nadu.

"The government is trying to create a Kashmir-like situation. Students who have just got their tenth marks couldn't use the internet to plan their next course of action. Foreign tourists in Kanyakumari are stranded because online bank transactions are impossible. It is almost like war zone" he rues.

Opposition leaders including M K Stalin have demanded the resignation of Chief Minister Edappadi Palanisamy and DGP Rajendran for the 'massacre in Thoothukudi.'

Even as Thoothukudi continues to remain under siege, there is one major demand that both the families of the victims and the protesters who had managed survive keep putting forth: Shut Sterlite down. "Unless that is done, there is no meaning to Thamizharan sacrificing his life" Valarmathi says.

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