

Aruna Jagadeesan panel faults police, Collector for Thoothukudi firing

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The Commission of Inquiry, headed by retired High Court judge Aruna Jagadeesan, which probed the police firing on anti-Sterlite protesters in Thoothukudi district that killed 13 persons in May 2018, has concluded that the police action was unprovoked and indiscriminate. It faulted the then Collector, N. Venkatesh, who it said made ill-conceived decisions.

On Thursday, the *Frontline*, a sister publication of *The Hindu*, which accessed extracts of the Commission's report submitted to the Tamil Nadu government in May this year, published online details of its damning findings. *The Hindu* independently verified the contents of the report, according to which the police fired at "fleeing protesters" and there was no material which indicated that the protesters were "militant". The report



A video grab of a policeman in plainclothes firing at protesters.

indicated that police firing was not resorted to as a reaction but the police had taken aim at fleeing protesters while hiding at safe places.

The Commission found gross negligence on the part of officials and pointed out that the firing was not at short range but at long range, indicating that sharpshooters were involved. The protesters were unarmed though they were throwing stones, and there was no threat to the life of the police

personnel, it said.

A clear failure on the part of the senior police officers was clearly observed, it said, pointing out that there was a lack of coordination among the police officers. The then District Collector was complacent and was found in dereliction of duty.

Human rights activist Henri Tiphagne, who is also the executive director of People's Watch, welcomed the report. "But it has been three months since it was submitted but it has not been placed in the Assembly so far. This is not an encouraging sign," he said. Action against those responsible for the firing was a major assurance in the DMK's election manifesto, he said.

Mr. Tiphagne said the DMK government had to convene a special session of the Assembly and release the report and then immediately initiate disciplinary action by suspending the

police officers and others named in the report.

"Nothing short of suspension [of the officers]. A separate prosecution should be initiated against them. While the CBI has done a shoddy job, action against police officers for the killing has to be initiated by the DMK, if it wants to live up to its election promise," Mr. Tiphagne contended.

CPI(M) leader K. Balakrishnan said he was happy that the findings had come out. "But it is hard to believe that only a handful of police officers and the Collector are responsible for such a major police firing without the knowledge of the State government at that time."

Underlining the need for the CBI to speed up investigation, Mr. Balakrishnan said, "The investigating agency should speed up the probe and identify all the accused persons responsible for the killing."