

CITIZENS' STATEMENT ON POLICE VIOLENCE AGAINST STERLITE PROTESTORS IN THOOTHUKUDI

Police violence in Thoothukudi has left at least 10 shot dead and hundreds injured. Not only was this tragedy totally avoidable, it appears that the Police have even given hot pursuit and shot at women and others in fishing hamlets like Thereseapuram. The sheer brutality of the police action reminds one of the manner in which the Jallikattu protests were dealt with.

The Government of Tamil Nadu, Union Ministry of Environment, Forests and Climate Change, the Tamil Nadu Pollution Control Board and the Thoothukudi District Administration are squarely responsible for allowing the situation to get to this unfortunate state by allowing Vedanta Sterlite to violate environmental and land use planning laws with impunity for over two decades.

The people who died are just ordinary people who have been forced to take to the streets, and march to the Collectorate to demand action from an administration that has systematically and for decades failed to enforce the law on Sterlite. The District Collector, the chairperson and member secretary of Tamil Nadu Pollution Control Board, the Secretaries holding the environment portfolios in the central and state governments, the ministers of environment at the state and centre, and the chief minister of Tamil Nadu need to account for their inaction in the face of overwhelming evidence of illegalities, environmental harm and damage to public health.

This is not the first time that Sterlite's pollution and the impunity it enjoys has been the cause of public anger in Thoothukudi. In 2013, the Supreme Court of India curiously found the company guilty of misrepresentation, unlicensed operation and polluting the environment, but allowed the company to operate after paying a small fine as it felt India needed the copper.

The company failed to reform its ways even after this narrow judicial escape. The regulators -- TNPCB and Ministry of Environment and Forests -- too continued their cosy relationship with Sterlite ignoring blatant violations of statutory conditions and clear indications of pollution. It is a known fact that the state and central governments have allowed Sterlite to operate with lower-than-required chimney stacks, thereby exposing lakhs of residents to higher levels of toxic pollutants.

It has ignored the tentative findings of a government medical college's health study that reported higher incidence of certain health problems among the villagers living around the factory.

Let us not forget that for the second time in two months more than a lakh residents of this coastal town have taken to the streets with one clear demand: Immediate and Complete Shutdown of Sterlite. The state government and the district administration should also be blamed for failing to appreciate the depth of resentment among the

people of Thoothukudi to Sterlite's illegal and polluting operations and the betrayal by the State of its people.

The Government of Tamil Nadu has lost its moral right to govern, and should at the very least ensure that the senior ministers who failed to read the signs properly and take preventive action resign. But before anything else, the Government of Tamil Nadu should have the decency to declare an end to the toxic terrorism unleashed by Sterlite and permanently close down the polluting unit.

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