

## Environmental Pollution

# Thoothukudi: Activists plan hunger strike after green tribunal allows Vedanta plant to re-open

Some have demanded that the government introduce a policy to permanently shut the Sterlite copper smelter, which they say is a major polluter in the district.

by S Senthilir

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File photo of protests in Thoothukudi in May 2018, during which 13 protestors were killed | AFP

The National Green Tribunal's decision to allow the functioning of Vedanta's Sterlite copper plant in Tamil Nadu's Thoothukudi district has created discontent among anti-Sterlite protestors who have fought for its closure as they have said it is a major polluter.

The tribunal on Saturday set aside the Tamil Nadu government's order to close the Sterlite plant and directed the Tamil Nadu Pollution Control Board to issue a fresh order of the renewal of consent.

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For two decades, activists and residents have protested against the plant, saying that it has contaminated the air and water in the region and caused health problems.

Following the green tribunal's order, fishermen, traders and anti-Sterlite activists met on Saturday afternoon in Thoothukudi. They have planned to continue their protest against the copper plant. "We will continue our fight till the copper plant is shut down," said a fisherman from Thoothukudi town, who did not want to be named.

At least 13 people protesting against the expansion of the copper smelter were killed on May 22 and May 23. This had prompted the state government to permanently shut down the plant days later.

On condition of anonymity, an activist said: "The order says that the Sterlite plant will be opened within three weeks. We are planning to begin a hunger strike and the date of the protest will be announced soon."

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A day before the green court's order was passed, several activists had left their homes in Thoothukudi fearing arrest.

Henri Tiphagne of the non-governmental organisation People's Watch called on the state to protect the right of the people to protest. "We are in an unfortunate situation. Hope they will allow people to protest peacefully. The government should protect the protesters and not the Sterlite plant," he said.

Activists also demanded that the government introduce a policy to shut the plant permanently. In Madurai district, advocate S Vanchinathan told the media, "The government can go for an appeal. At this moment, it is important that they bring in a policy for the closure of Sterlite plant." The Tamil Nadu government has said it will move the Supreme Court against the green tribunal's order.

Although it has allowed the Sterlite plant to re-open, the National Green Tribunal has directed it to carry out all recommendations of the Central Pollution Control Board. "The Collector, Thoothukudi District may now ensure compliance forthwith to ensure public safety. Any failure will invite coercive action," the tribunal's order said.

The plant has to regularly monitor the ground water quality as mandated by the Tamil Nadu Pollution Control Board and upload the data in comprehensible form on the website. It has also directed Sterlite to deposit Rs 2.5 crore for mishandling 3.5 lakh tonnes of copper slag near the factory and to form a digital portal for registering complaints about its operations. Besides this, the green court has ordered the company to set aside Rs 100 crore to be spent for local welfare projects over three years.