

Sterlite Protest

Sterlite violence: Video shows policemen taking aim and shooting at protesters

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Priyanka Thirumurthy | Tuesday, May 22, 2018 - 21:48



Eleven people have lost their lives, including a teenager. Protesters who marched to the Thoothukudi Collectorate against the expansion of the Sterlite Copper plant owned by Vedanta limited were stopped by barricades put up by the police. As people marched ahead, breaching the barricades and entered the Collectorate, the police retaliated and fired at the crowds. By Tuesday evening, more than ten people had lost their lives in the violence. (While TN government says 9 people have died, TN Governor put the number at 11).

Though the Tamil Nadu government maintains that the police action was unavoidable, visuals being telecast by Tamil TV channels Puthiya Thalamurai and News 18 Tamil Nadu show policemen in plain clothes taking aim from top of a police van and firing at protesters. In a sequence of events caught on video, a policeman in a yellow T shirt is standing on top of the van and firing a rifle. Later, another policeman in a black T shirt climbs

to the top of the van, lies down and takes aim to shoot. The protesters don't seem to be in the near vicinity of the police. Other reports say that police took aim from vantage points on roofs of buildings too.

In other visuals, a group of policeman in riot gear can be seen trying to protect themselves from stone pelting by a group of protesters.

A government statement said, "The mob resorted to violence, set on fire police vehicles and those parked at the collectorate and pelted stones at the collector's office. To bring the violence under control, under unavoidable circumstances, police had to take action. To maintain law and order additional police personnel have been sent to Tuticorin."

On 24th March, a similar protest in Thoothukudi saw two lakh residents assemble peacefully to express their displeasure over Sterlite's activities. So what went wrong this time?

"It is a complete intelligence failure by Central and state agencies. They completely misjudged the people's anger on the ground," says Henri Tiphagne of People's Watch.

A statement by People's Watch, a human rights organisation which was present on the ground to monitor the protest said that the police tried to lathi charge protesters several times, but the failed to disperse the crowds.

"After due notification to the Superintendent of Police, witnessed several failed attempts by the police to lathi charge the protesters, who were approaching the epicentre of the protest rally from all directions. The lathi charge saw little to no impact on the marching crowds whose growing numbers posed a direct threat to the safety of the police contingent. The police were forced to fall back and were eventually delegated to guard the Collectorate."

According to a statement by People's Watch, the lathi charges

angered the protesters more. “The protest, which was at first peaceful and included a diverse gathering including persons with disabilities and transgender persons, soon turned violent as a result of the police shooting at the Collectorate. As soon as people found out that fellow protesters were shot dead by the police and several others were left injured, they resorted to violence. The protesters began to target their violence towards the Sterlite Housing Quarters, which was located right beside the Collectorate. The People’s Watch delegation witnessed, first hand, stone pelting on the Sterlite Housing Quarters, which, shockingly, was not cleared for evacuation beforehand. The protesters who eventually forced an entry into the compound collected petrol from the two-wheelers and used it to make petrol bombs and set ablaze nearly twenty cars and bikes that were packed in the basement of the building. “

A protester and eyewitness on the ground, 43-year-old Kittu tells TNM, "They lathi charged us indiscriminately even though we were peacefully marching. Women and children were brutally hit with sticks and butts of guns. The they even began shooting. How could we quietly watch this injustice?"

In the midst of this chaos a protester, whose head was allegedly injured by police bullets was seen being carried, adding to the existing anger.

People’s Watch further observes that the Government of Tamil Nadu, which was given a choice to either stand by its people or by a copper industry, chose the private entity instead.

"It must also be brought to the attention of the public and the State that the police firing in Tuticorin was indiscriminate and random," says the organisation. "There were no warning signs given to the protesters that the police were going to open fire