Thoothukudi Sterlite Violence

What is the issue?

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- The protest against Sterlite Copper Smelting plant in Thoothukudi (Tamil Nadu) had been intensifying in the past few months.
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- Recently, amid government clampdown, the protests turned violent, and resulted in the death of more than 10 people.
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How did the Sterlite struggle evolve?

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- Sterlite stakes claim to be India’s largest copper producer and is a major presence in Tamil Nadu’s industrial mix.
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- But the industry has been under the scanner for environmental violations since its inception in the 1990s.
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- Significantly, the Supreme Court in 2013 had imposed an Rs.100-crore fine on Sterlite for pollution.
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- As the nearby residencies started to face health and environmental issues, they had been protesting sporadically for many years now.
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- But the proposal for the plant’s expansion plan intensified protests about a couple of months ago and the situation has remained heated since then.
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- TN government has claimed that the plant is currently not operational and that expansion has been stalled.
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- But there was complete official apathy to convey this message unambiguously to the protesting masses, thereby attracting suspensions.
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What led to the recent violence?

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- To mark the 100th day of their protest, the people planned to take a massive rally to the district collector’s office.
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- Suspecting that the situation would go out of control, the Madras High Court directed the government to take sufficient precautions.
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- The TN government has imposed prohibitory orders (sec.144) and stationed a strong police battalion on the ground.
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- While the police battalion was indeed strong, the intensity of protesters seemed stronger and police barricades were repeatedly breached.
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- Police resorted to lathi charge, which infuriated the mob, which in turn started pelting stones to wade off police actions.
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- Subsequent police firing led to the death of at least 10 people, and the infuriated mob vandalised the collectorate.
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What is the way ahead?

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- **Immediate Response -** The public need to be compensated for their losses and a dialogue needs to be initiated with the affected communities.
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- More importantly, the inquiry commission constituted to examine the killings needs to examine the chilling use of disproportionate lethal force.
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- Notably, the use of snipers raises the suspension of selective and premeditated killing of protestors, and hardly seems to be a riot control measure.
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- The basis on which firing orders were given and the failure of police to appropriately intervene to resolve the crisis needs to be probed.
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- **Addressing Concerns -** Madras High Court has presently restrained

Sterlite from its proposed capacity expansion plan till further orders.
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- A credible environmental audit should be undertaken, without compromising on the ‘polluter pays’ principle.
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- The TNPCB, which usually scores poorly on transparency, should commission credible experts to assess the quality of air and water in Thoothukudi.
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Source: The Hindu

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