

PRESS RELEASE – 18 September 2013

Nemmeli Desal Plant Dumping Effluents on Beach: Fact Finding Team

A fact-finding team that looked into allegations of police excesses against fisherfolk who were voicing concerns about the Nemmeli desalination plant has found Metrowater to be in violation of environmental norms, and the Kanchipuram police to have acted in a malafide manner in dealing with the issues raised by the fisherfolk. The team comprising former I.A.S officer Louis Menezes, President of PUCL-TN & Pondy Prof. Saraswathy, High Court advocate P. Sundararajan, and writer activist Nityanand Jayaraman was set up by the Chennai Solidarity Group which was acting on complaints by villagers about a midnight raid by the police on 28 August.

The team found that Metrowater's Nemmeli desalination plant is dumping highly saline RO rejects directly onto the beach instead of disposing it through a pipeline as per its environmental license conditions. At full capacity, the plant will discharge about 2000 litres of polluted effluents per second on the beach. This has altered the profile of the beach, and rendered the drinking water handpumps in the entire village unfit for drinking. "It is ironical that the Nemmeli desalination plant which was set up to convert salt water to freshwater, has ended up converting freshwater to salt water," the team observed. "The Ministry of Environment & Forests, the State Coastal Zone Management Authority and the Tamil Nadu Pollution Control Board are missing in action," the team's report stated. "A blatant and visible violation of the law – i.e. the discharge of saline effluents on the beach – is not only being ignored, but the violators are being offered the protection of the State Police," the report stated.

The team also found that road-like structures constructed into the sea by Metrowater's consultant VA Tech WABAG to transport equipment had eroded the beach of Sulerikattukuppam resulting in the collapse of several community halls. This has drastically affected the livelihoods of local fisherfolk. Several people complained that their children were being taunted by teachers because of their inability to pay school fees.

The fact-finding team found Metro Water guilty of crimes under the Indian Penal Code, including fouling public water supplies, negligent handling of a noxious substance, damaging public property, and endangering lives by causing sea erosion. Elected representatives and officials such as the District Collector have failed to effectively intervene to address the legitimate grievances of the affected fisherfolk. Ignoring lawfully articulated demands would prompt people to resort to desperate measures.

Instead of addressing the concerns of the villagers, Metrowater has sought police assistance to shut people up. The Police too have responded in a one-sided manner in accepting and acting with great promptness and viciousness on the complaints by Metro Water. The team also found that the Police have acted in a malafide manner by conducting a door-to-door midnight raid on 28 August, by verbally abusing women, using sexual innuendos, and picking up and detaining innocent people for an entire day. The team said that the "Police have acted illegally and mercilessly in beating and detaining two school students as part of their midnight raid."

The team has made the following recommendations, among others:

1. Withdrawal of all FIRs filed against the villagers; stern action against officials who have misbehaved with residents (particularly women and children) of Sulerikattukuppam.
2. The Ministry of Environment & Forests and the Tamil Nadu Pollution Control Board should institute an enquiry based on this report, and suspend Metrowater's environmental clearance if it is found to have violated the conditions of clearance.
3. Tamil Nadu Government should appoint a committee to assess losses sustained by villagers to their property and livelihoods, and compensate them for it.
4. Drinking water should be provided immediately, and children's school fees should be paid by Metrowater.

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