

4 March 2019

India: Disappearance of human rights defender Mugilan in Tamil Nadu

As of 4 March 2019, human rights defender Shanmugam Thangasamy, better known as **RS Mugilan**, remains missing. On 15 February 2019, RS Mugilan disappeared while on his way from Chennai to Madurai. He was last seen at the Chennai Egmore Railway Station after having co-organised a press conference relating to the killing of 13 protestors at a demonstration in May 2018.

[RS Mugilan](#) is a human rights defender from Chennai and the Coordinator of the **Tamil Nadu Environment Protection Committee**. He has worked tirelessly on environmental issues in Tamil Nadu, opposing such issues as illegal sand mining and nuclear power. He has most recently been involved with the Anti-Sterlite Movement, which opposes a copper plant in Thoothukudi set up by copper-smelting company Sterlite Industries (India) Limited, a subsidiary of the UK-based company, Vedanta Resources. The human rights defender had been part of the fact-finding team to Thoothukudi and it is believed that his disappearance is linked to this line of work.

At 11.30am on 15 February 2019, RS Mugilan took part in a press conference, which he had co-organised, at the Chennai Press Club. Its purpose was to discuss the violence that broke out during the anti-Sterlite protests in Thoothukudi on 22 May 2018, at which police shot and killed 13 persons.

At the press conference, RS Mugilan released a 46-minute-long documentary entitled, Koluthiyathu Yaar? Maraikkapatta Unmaigal (Arsonists - Sterlite - The Hidden Truths). The documentary claimed that the police—in collaboration with officials from Sterlite Industries—had allowed a number of individuals, who RS Mugilan believe were hired by Sterlite, to disrupt the protest. The group set fire to bicycles and damaged CCTV cameras around the area in which the shooting subsequently took place. In the documentary, the human rights defender demanded that police officers involved in the shooting be arrested. He named high-level police officials, including the then-Inspector General of Police, Mr Shailesh Kumar Yadav, and Deputy Inspector General of Police Mr Kapil Kumar Saratkar as being complicit in orchestrating the incident.

After the press conference, at around 6.30pm, RS Mugilan made a call to his friend, who is the Tamil Nadu State Focal point and Regional Coordinator of Human Rights Defenders' Alert – India (HRDA) for South India. In the call, RS Mugilan told his friend that he had received threats and that he was worried about police action against him following the allegations he made against high-level police officials.

At around 9.30pm on 15 February, RS Mugilan informed his friend via SMS that he had arrived at the Chennai Egmore Railway Station to catch the Nagercoil Express train to Madurai. He also arranged to meet with his friend in Madurai the next morning. However, when the friend called RS Mugilan at 6am on 16 February 2019, the human rights defender could not be reached as his phone was turned off. CCTV footage from the station shows RS Mugilan walking out of Egmore Railway Station after 10pm, but there is no further information about his whereabouts and also no indication of whether he in fact boarded the train. According to fellow human rights defenders, RS Mugilan's phone was last connected at Olukkur in Villupuram District.

On 18 February 2019, fearing that RS Mugilan had been forcibly disappeared for his claims at the press conference, People's Watch submitted a habeas corpus petition to the Madras High Court, after their complaints about RS Mugilan's suspected abduction to the Chief Minister's office and the Tamil Nadu Director General of Police (DGP) were not acted upon. The Madras High Court proceeded to direct the Commissioner of Police, Chennai and the Superintendents of Police of Kanchipuram and Villupuram districts to submit a response by 22 February 2019. Since then, Tamil Nadu police have registered a "missing person" report.

On 25 February 2019, the Tamil Nadu Director General of Police (DGP) issued an order to transfer the case to the Crime Branch of the Crime Investigation Department (CB-CID) for further investigation.

This is not the first time that RS Mugilan has been targetted for his peaceful work in defence of human rights. In March 2012, the human rights defender was illegally detained by police for three days in relation to his involvement in exposing illegal sand mining in Koodankulam. In September 2017, he was arrested once again for his work on the same issue and was only released in September 2018 after his lawyer obtained bail.

Front Line Defenders is gravely concerned about the disappearance of human rights defender RS Mugilan and believes that his disappearance is in retaliation for his involvement in investigating and denouncing the human rights violations linked to Sterlite Industries' copper plant. Front Line Defenders expresses further concern over the lack of a safe and enabling environment in India for human rights defenders to carry out their valuable work.

Front Line Defenders urge the authorities in India to:

1. Take all necessary measures to determine the whereabouts of RS Mugilan and guarantee his physical and psychological security and integrity;
2. Carry out an immediate, thorough and impartial investigation into the disappearance of RS Mugilan, with a view to publishing the results and bringing those responsible to justice in accordance with international standards;
3. Guarantee in all circumstances that all human rights defenders in India are able to carry out their legitimate human rights activities without fear of reprisals and free of all restrictions.