

Blaze at Goa club kills 25 as guests seen fleeing the venue screaming

Fire sparked after gas cylinder exploded near kitchen at popular tourist destination in India

By Iona Cleave and Andrea Hamblin

A HUGE fire tore through a nightclub in one of India's most popular beach resorts, killing at least 25 people including tourists. Musicians were playing on stage when the fire broke through the ceiling and engulfed the club in a matter of minutes.

Guests were heard screaming as they fled the venue in video recorded inside the club as the fire took hold.

The blaze started at just after midnight on Sunday when a gas cylinder exploded near the kitchen of Birch by Romeo Lane, a dance venue and restaurant in Arpora, in North Goa, on India's southwestern coast, police said.

Footage taken outside the luxury club showed the entire structure



engulfed in dark red flames.

The fire is believed to have started on the third floor and raced through the venue's palm-leaf decor and wooden beams, engulfing the mezzanine floor and cutting off escape routes.

The nightclub, by the Arpora river backwaters, had a narrow entry and exit that forced fire crews to park their tankers about 400m away, according to reports, hampering their efforts.

A local police officer, Harish Sawant, confirmed the death toll and told *The Telegraph* that six people remained in

hospital. "All the victims are Indian nationals," he said.

Pyrotechnic machines could have triggered the fire in the ceiling of the third floor, he added.

"They use bursts of sparks during a drop to heighten excitement and make the atmosphere feel more dramatic."

Most of the victims are believed to be cooks, cleaners and helpers, he said.

Pramod Sawant, Goa's chief minister, said: "Preliminary findings indicate the fire spread rapidly due to congestion and blocked exits. Some people ran downstairs and became trapped there."

A judicial inquiry has been initiated and the general manager of the nightclub has been arrested, Mr Sawant said.

Fatima Shaikh, who escaped, said: "We rushed out of the club only to see that the entire structure was up in flames."

Distraught families and co-workers of the victims gathered outside the mortuary of Goa Medical College and Hospital in Panaji to identify the bodies.

Among them was Nandla Nag, a secu-

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rity guard originally from Jharkhand. "My nephew was on the night shift," he said. "We want his body sent home. We don't have a home here and don't have the money for ambulances."

Another group from Assam said they had not heard from five friends who worked in the club's kitchen and floor staff. "Their phones are off. We fear the worst," one man said.

Emergency crews worked through the night. A firefighter said they found most bodies near the kitchen.

"There was dense smoke, low visibility, and a lot of debris. Most of the staff have died due to suffocation," he said.

Roshan Redkar, head of Arpora village, said the nightclub had been operating without local permission for nearly a year while opposition politicians accused the state government of overlooking repeated safety violations.

Narendra Modi, India's prime minister, said: "My thoughts are with all those who have lost their loved ones."

The moment fire breaks out in the nightclub, top right, and outside the blazing building, above

