

Nightclub fire kills at least 25 in India's tourist hotspot

Most of the victims were trapped in the basement and died of suffocation

Sanjay Kumar New Delhi

At least 25 people were killed in a fire overnight at a club in a popular resort region of Goa, officials said on Sunday, in what was the southwestern Indian state's deadliest such incident on record.

The blaze broke out after midnight at the club in Arpora in North Goa.

The death toll was confirmed on social media by Goa Chief Minister Pramod Sawant, who said that most of the victims died of suffocation, while another six people were admitted to hospital.

Sawant announced an official investigation, the arrest of the club's general manager and an arrest warrant for the owner.

"It is the first time that such an incident has occurred in

Goa's history," he told the NDTV news channel.

Cleophas Fernandese, eyewitness and former deputy village head of Arpora, told Arab News that most of the casualties were trapped in the club's underground kitchen.

"The fire broke out on the first floor, and the kitchen was in the basement. When the fire started, the people in the basement did not realize what was happening," he said.

"The people who were underground could not come out and they got suffocated."

Goa, a small coastal state, is one of India's most famous tourist destinations. Its northern part is particularly popular for its nightlife and party culture.

In Arpora, a village of 700 people, the Birch by Romeo Lane club is one of the poshest establishments. Its island-like

venue is located along the Arpora River backwaters, with a narrow entry and exit, which local media said delayed firefighters as they rushed to the site.

It is also an establishment where operations had previously raised concerns over safety,

HIGHLIGHT

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legality and disturbance to the local community, according to Raju Nayak, editor of Gomantak Media, a local news publisher and TV broadcaster.

"Most of the places where nightclubs run are illegal and

they are operating illegally. The government was not paying proper attention to security," he said.

"We are still gathering the full report, but the primary report says that this is because of negligence and no proper care has been taken, and security arrangements there were faulty."

Steffi Fernandes, a member of Arpora village council, was at the site when rescue operations were underway.

She said the community was in shock at the incident.

"We are speechless ... This is the first time we have this kind of fire happen in a nightclub," Fernandes said.

"These clubs are operating illegally, and I don't know how they get permission. I don't know thanks to whose pressure they were operating. I feel such clubs should be completely shut down."