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Leopold firing ends 24-yr-old's dream

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MUMBAI: Until Wednesday evening, everything was going right for Kazi Hidayatullah. The 24-year-old youth was working as a waiter at the landmark Leopold Cafe. He was getting married on December 15 and had last met his fiancée during the weekend. Then a month ago, a customer from Johannesburg offered him a job at a Capetown hotel. "He was so excited about his future, he was doing double shifts and saving up money," recalled Kuresh Siddique, a friend and fellow Leopold staffer.

Now, it has all ended. Siddique was the one who identified the body at the Nair hospital morgue on Thursday morning. "I pray Allah's curse falls on his killers," he said.

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A group of Leopold staffers had gathered in the morgue. In one corner stood Anwarullah, Kazi's prospective father-in-law, who was in state of shock. "Kazi was like a son to me. He had been staying with us on and off, he was related to us. I cannot believe he is dead," Anwarullah said.

The 130-year-old Leopold Cafe is hugely popular with the expat crowd and even finds special mention in reputed travel guides like Lonely Planet. According to eyewitness accounts, the crowd at the cafe on Wednesday evening was fairly large. "It was almost full, there was slow jazz playing. There were some foreigners, including the crew of a South African airline, enjoying a couple of drinks both downstairs and upstairs in the restaurant," said a waiter, describing the scene.

At 9.20 pm, four of the militants ran in and started firing indiscriminately. "We didn't know what hit us, everyone ran for cover," said one waiter. "We heard loud screams and shrieks for help from downstairs, but we did not have the courage to come down," said another member of the staff.

At least 10 people are believed to have died in the attack. Siddique said he was fortunate to be alive - it was his day off. "But I feel I have lost my life already, my closest pal has died. We were planning to go to Johannesburg together after his wedding. Now I do not even want to go back to work," he said.

Anwarullah said they have broken the news to Kazi's mother who is in their native town in Uttar Pradesh. "She is mad with grief. Kazi was their only son and they had big hopes for him," he said.

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