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AFP

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Cafe staff tell of ordeal

MUMBAI, INDIA - MR ERIC Anthony fled through the back door of Mumbai's Leopold's cafe, dodging bullets as people running with him were shot dead.

Mr Thomson Fernandez dived under a table and stayed there terrified as bodies dropped to the floor around him.

Ten people at the cafe on the night of Nov 26, including two staff, were killed when Islamist extremists burst through the two front doors and sprayed the place with bullets.

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The attack was part of a coordinated series of assaults on a number of Mumbai landmarks which ended 60 hours later with 163 civilians and security personnel dead, and almost 300 people injured.

Leopold's reopened three days later as one of its owners said they 'would not be beaten by terrorists', and both Mr Anthony and Mr Fernandes said they were happy to be back at work.

On the night of the attacks, the cafe, popular with tourists and locals alike, was bustling as usual with 70 to 80 customers.

At precisely 9.40pm (2.10am Singapore time) 'two guys came in through the front doors and started firing', Mr Anthony, 33, told AFP.

'First they shot upwards,' he said, pointing to bullet holes in the coloured glass around the cafe's upper dining room.

As people began screaming, diving under tables and running for the back exit, the gunmen opened fire, said Mr Anthony, who attends Catholic mass daily.

'They threw a grenade which exploded near the bar,' he said, pointing to a deep crater. 'Then they disappeared for about three minutes but they kept firing in through the front window.'

Mr Anthony, the cafe's night manager, fled through the back door, followed by waiter Peeru Basha, 41.

As another waiter, Mr Mohammed Kazi, 21, lay dead at his feet on the street outside, Mr Anthony said he shouted at Mr Peeru to help him get the body into a taxi.

'Peeru had been shot in the neck and said he feels giddy, he turns around to go back inside and is shot in the neck, shot dead,' he recalled.

As Mr Anthony crouched over Mr Kazi's body, one of the gunmen - 'muscular but short and with a big moustache and a backpack', he said - rushed out of the back door and pointed his AK-47 straight at him.

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'I moved my head, I ducked,' he said. The gunman fired and a bullet whizzed past Mr Anthony's left ear, leaving a round black mark.

'I am totally devoted to Christ,' he said. 'I believe He wanted me to live.' Meanwhile Mr Fernandes, the cafe's night shift captain, was cowering under a table as bodies dropped around him.

'One guy fell beside me, he had been hit in the head and I could see he was dead,' he said, clearly still effected by the ordeal.

'A second guy also fell, and I could see they were both customers.

'I was terrified they (the gunmen) would see me and shoot me,' he said, adding that they were shooting people as they lay on the floor.

'Everything had fallen down and people were screaming, some ran away.

'When (the gunmen) went outside I came out from under the table and the phone rang so I answered it. I just started shouting down the phone that there was firing, and then they came back and I ran into the kitchen,' he said.

When he emerged 20 minutes later, he helped pile the dead and injured into taxis and ambulances, and headed to hospital to help identify the bodies of his colleagues.

'I stayed there all night, helping to take the injured into the hospital,' he said.

A Catholic who attends mass weekly, the baby-faced 25-year-old said: 'I am still a little bit scared, because I have seen dead bodies next to me. But I have to get on with my life. I hope I never have to go through that again.' -- AFP

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