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Monday, 11 March, 2002, 18:02 GMT

Schoolgirls die in Mecca stampede



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At least fourteen girls have died at a school in Saudi Arabia as they tried to flee a fire.

More than 50 others were injured.

Eyewitnesses said the pupils were trampled to death as they tried to get through the school gate, which was locked.

Girls' schools in Saudi Arabia are usually locked to ensure full segregation of the sexes.

'Overcrowded'

About 800 pupils were reported to have been at the school in the holy city of Mecca when the incident occurred early on Monday.

The school gate was locked to prevent girls leaving without permission, and to stop strangers coming in.

Witnesses said the key was with a male guard, who was not there to open the gate.

The official Saudi news agency said the fire was caused by an electrical short circuit.

Relatives were quoted as saying the three-storey school was overcrowded and lacked proper safety facilities.

Mecca governor Prince Abdul Majeed bin Abdul Aziz visited the injured girls in hospital and later inspected the school.

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