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Friday, 15 March, 2002, 12:19 GMT

## Saudi police 'stopped' fire rescue



The Mecca city governor visited the fire-damaged school

Saudi Arabia's religious police stopped schoolgirls from leaving a blazing building because they were not wearing correct Islamic dress, according to Saudi newspapers.

In a rare criticism of the kingdom's powerful "mutaween" police, the Saudi media has accused them of hindering attempts to save 15 girls who died in the fire on Monday.

About 800 pupils were inside the school in the holy city of Mecca when the tragedy occurred.

According to the al-Eqtisadiyah daily, firemen confronted police after they tried to keep the girls inside because they were not wearing the headscarves and abayas (black robes) required by the kingdom's strict interpretation of Islam.



15 girls died in the blaze and more than 50 others were injured

One witness said he saw three policemen "beating young girls to prevent them from leaving the school because they were not wearing the abaya".

The Saudi Gazette quoted witnesses as saying that the police - known as the Commission for the Promotion of Virtue and Prevention of Vice - had stopped men who tried to help the girls and warned "it is a sinful to approach them".

The father of one of the dead girls said that the school watchman even refused to open the gates to let the girls out.

"Lives could have been saved had they not been stopped by members of the Commission for Promotion of Virtue and Prevention of Vice," the newspaper concluded.

### Relatives' anger

Families of the victims have been incensed over the deaths.

Most of the victims were crushed in a stampede as they tried to flee the blaze.

The school was locked at the time of the fire - a usual practice to ensure full segregation of the sexes.

The religious police are widely feared in Saudi Arabia. They roam the streets enforcing dress codes and sex segregation, and ensuring prayers are performed on time.

Those who refuse to obey their orders are often beaten and sometimes put in jail.

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