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Saudi Arabia : Investigation into tragic death of 14 school girls must be transparent and public

Amnesty International is gravely concerned at reports that 14 girls have lost their lives and dozens of others were injured following a fire at their school in Mecca on 11 March 2002 after the religious police (Mutawa'een) prevented them from escaping from the fire because they were not wearing headscarves and their male relatives were not there to receive them.

The religious police are also reported to have prevented rescuers from entering the school because they were males and therefore not permitted to mix with females.

"If these reports are true, this is a tragic illustration of how gender discrimination can have lethal consequences."

"When state policies on segregation of sexes are implemented at the expense of human life, urgent steps are needed at the highest level. Policies and practises through which the lives of women and girls are devalued must be changed."

Amnesty International welcomes calls for an urgent investigation into these tragic deaths to prevent any future recurrence and for anyone found responsible to be brought to justice. The findings of such investigation must be made public.

Saudi Arabia must take urgent measures to end all forms of discrimination against women in accordance with CEDAW (Convention

on Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women), to which Saudi Arabia is a state party.

Background

The Saudi Arabian English language daily Arab News quoted eye witnesses as having said: "Whenever the girls got out through the main gate, these people [Mutawa'een] forced them to return via another",..."instead of extending a helping hand for the rescue work, they were using their hands to beat us,"

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