

Trapped. The victims are thought to have been trapped in their dormitory as the windows were barred with metal grilles.

BY AFP

MALAYSIA. At least 24 people, mostly children, were killed yesterday when a blaze tore through a Malaysian religious school, trapped in their dormitory by metal grilles on the windows.

Pupils and teachers inside the Islamic study centre in downtown Kuala Lumpur screamed for help as helpless neighbours looked on.

Many of the bodies of the victims, who included 22 boys aged between 13 and 17, were found piled on top of one another, indicating there may have been a stampede as the students sought to escape the blaze which erupted before dawn.

Firefighters rushed to the scene and the fire was out within an hour but it wreaked terrible devastation. Pictures in local media showed ash-covered, fire-blackened beds in the students' sleeping quarters.

"The building was on fire as the morning call to prayer was sounding," Norhayati Abdul Halim, 46, who lives opposite the school, told AFP.

"I could hear screaming, I thought there were people fighting. I opened the window to my house and I could see the school on fire they cried for help but I couldn't do anything," she added.

According to Norhayati, by the time firefighters arrived at the Darul Quran Ittifaqiyah religious school in the heart of the capital, "the screams had stopped.

Federal Territories minister Tengku Adnan Tengku Mansor, said the children, who were boarders at the school,

24 people perish in Malaysia school fire



Disaster. Malaysian fire and rescue personnel stand outside the Darul Quran Ittifaqiyah religious school in Kuala Lumpur yesterday. PHOTO BY AFP

were "desperately trying to escape the flames" but metal security grilles covering the windows of their dormitory

NO LICENCE

Illegal. Minister Tengku Adnan said the school did not have the required licences to operate from local authorities, a development sure to renew attention on the country's Islamic schools.

prevented them.

Officials said they were unable to leave through the only door to the dormitory, as it was on fire.

Khirudin Drahan, director of Kuala Lumpur's fire and rescue department, told AFP it was one of the country's worst firetragedies in 20 years.

Fire officials said they suspected the blaze was caused by an electrical short circuit, or a mosquito repelling device. Officials initially said 23 students and two teachers were killed in the blaze.