

## **Saudi religious police to hold review after deaths**

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Saudi Arabia's religious police said yesterday they would review procedures after coming under attack from human right activists and local media over the deaths of two detainees in under a month.

The religious police have wide powers in Saudi Arabia, which imposes an austere form of Sunni Islam, to enforce bans on drugs, alcohol and prostitution as well as to stop unrelated men and women from mixing.

But the squad, which hardline clerics say is central to their Islamic state, has come under increasing criticism from newspapers and activists who complain of overzealous behaviour.

Daily Arab News reported this week that five members of the morality police in the northern province of Tabuk were being questioned after 50-year-old Ahmed Al Bulawi died of a heart attack while in their custody.

They had arrested Bulawi, a driver, on suspicion of being caught in a state of "illegal seclusion" with a woman who turned out to be related to his employers, it said.

A week earlier, police opened an investigation into the death of Salman Al Huraisy, 28, while in the custody of religious police in the capital Riyadh. Relatives accused the squad of beating him and dragging from his home.

They told Al Watan newspaper that other members of the family who were also seized had seen Huraisy beaten to death in detention. The vice squad accused them of dealing with alcohol.

The state news agency SPA said the head of the morality police, Ibrahim Al Ghaith, had ordered the creation of committees to review procedures and would soon unveil measures to "reduce errors and raise the level of control on operations".

It quoted a religious police official saying the squad would be "firm on any violation committed by its members".

The Interior Ministry has rejected calls to disband the force, despite an increase in public criticism of its members, who wear distinctive long beards, loose headscarves and white robes that stop above the ankles in what they consider to be an imitation of early Muslims.

But under regulations introduced last year, members of the autonomous body which answers to the king can only take action against citizens in the presence of Interior Ministry officers.

Saudi newspaper Okaz reported last week that a woman was severely hurt after she jumped off the fourth floor of a building in the Red Sea port city of Jeddah when religious police broke into her apartment, suspecting she was involved in indecent activities.

Human rights activist Ibrahim Al Mugaiteeb said violations were a result of the squad's "vague mandate".

"The commission does not have clear prerogatives and this is the source of the problem," he said. "It plays both the role of judiciary and police ... They don't even have proper uniforms, anyone can come up to you and pretend to be a member."