

Grenfell fire witness Johnny Regasa: “You saw so many people at their windows burning alive”

Our reporters
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Johnny Regasa lost a friend, Hashim Kedir, in the Grenfell Tower fire and assisted several survivors. Speaking to WSWs reporters at Sunday’s vigil for five-year-old Isaac Paulos, one of Grenfell’s youngest victims, Regasa gave his account of that night’s harrowing events.

“I heard passersby through our windows. I woke up and saw the fire. I started recording on my mobile phone. But straight away, it clicked that a friend of mine [Hashim] lives in this area. I didn’t know whether it was his building, so I stopped recording and called him. And I was right. He lived in the same building. I told him, ‘Your building is on fire.’ I told him to get out. He was on the 22nd floor. The fire had been going about 45 minutes already.”

“‘John,’ he said to me, ‘I’ve got three kids and I’ll try to do my best to get out.’ I said, ‘Check the doors.’ He opened the doors and said, ‘There’s smoke coming through these doors,’ and he closed the doors.

“I said to him, ‘I’m coming over. I’m running.’ So straight away roughly, I ran down from my house. It was a five minute drive. ...

“The police and firefighters said, ‘You are not allowed in,’ I said, ‘No, my friend is upstairs,’ and they told me ‘no.’ ”

Referring to the small numbers of fire engines then present and their well-reported access problems, Regasa said:

“There were only a couple of them there. Most of them came from the Shepherds Bush side, and they don’t have access to the building because of the roadworks. There are massive roadworks going on in St. Annes Road. They [the fire engines] are queuing up like a train, and they have to reverse back and find

alternative routes. It takes a minimum of between 10 minutes and 15 minutes to find alternative routes.

“The other routes are being blocked with families and relatives’ cars who are trying to get to the building as well. There was no space for the fire trucks. We ran to the Latimer Road entrance to the building, and we saw things melting down off the building.

“The first person I saw come out of the building was a black guy. He was so happy to speak to me. I put him up by the tree. I said just sit there and I have some water [that Regasa had brought with him from his car].

“He just kept vomiting. It was this black stuff. It just kept coming up. I said, ‘Give me your little girl,’ and she didn’t want to come, as she was scared.”

The girl was also vomiting, and Regasa told the father, “Don’t worry,” as he washed the girl’s face and cleaned her nose and mouth. This family lived on the 14th floor, and both father and daughter survived.

“People kept coming out, and I tried to help. I remember an old lady—she can’t even walk. She is asthmatic, and I just dragged her out. I put her under the tree and gave her water and washed her face.

“I said to the fire brigade, ‘My friend is on the 22nd floor, with kids and everything.’ I took my phone, and the fire brigade spoke to him and said they were going to try to make it to him.

“Then the last one I met was Isaac’s [Paulos] family. They had breathing problems, and they were in shock. I said to Isaac’s dad, ‘Give me the little boy.’ His dad said, ‘I lost my other boy. I’m looking for Isaac. I’m looking for my older son.’

“They gave me the boy, the dad and mum, and ran back to the building. They couldn’t find him. The dad then came back to me and said give me my son. He

said, ‘No daddy. I don’t want to come to you.’ He thought his dad was going to take him back to the building.”

Isaac’s parents then collected his brother Lukas and went to hospital.

Regasa continued, “I went back then and I saw them dragging out the bodies from the staircase and you can’t see the other side and I just gave up. I knew my friend didn’t make it.

“The firefighters were crying when they came out of the building. They needed water and they didn’t have water left. They said they had never seen this kind of thing before. They were just crying like little kids.

“There were so many people that come onto the stairs that can’t even walk. All the people, pensioners, disabled people, they can’t walk. They tried to make it downstairs. You saw so many people at their windows burning alive. You saw people alive, with their mobile phones, flashing their lights. The smoke just dragged them in. You looked up, then everything is gone.”

Regasa spoke of the arrival of riot police, who barred access to the area.

“They never mentioned it in the news or anything. They came up and they blocked everyone, and then they just disappeared. I don’t know where they went.

“People were pretty angry. Instead of saving people, why were they pushing us away? Why were they pushing our people away?

“They were proper riot police, so many of them you can’t count them. Your mind is thinking about the fire. When is the building going to collapse? That’s what you are thinking. I was thinking about my friend, Hashim. That’s what was on my mind.

“They blocked everyone, they stopped our access. Even to give them first aid. They stopped access.”

The disaster has had a terrible impact on Regasa.

“I couldn’t sleep for three or four days. I just kept crying. I tried to go back to work on Monday after four weeks, but I couldn’t. I work as a chauffeur. I tried to go back to work, but I couldn’t. It is a big challenge for me, for everyone, for the local area.

“The problem we have now is that I can see the building from my window. I stopped opening my curtains. My curtains are closed all the time now.”

Asked who he thought bore responsibility for the Grenfell disaster, Regasa replied:

“I don’t want to think about it. It’s everybody’s

fault. I was never in the building previously, I was not a resident, but they said there was a gas pipe in the fire exit. How did they manage to do that?

“They are keeping people [the survivors] in a hotel. People with wives, kids in one room, in a box room, it’s so unfair. They couldn’t find Hashim, his remains or anything. They haven’t found any of him. They found his son, but not the rest of the family. They are still searching.

“I can’t wait until people cover up this building, with scaffolding, anything. This is affecting everyone. Everyone is suffering now from the dust, the ash. We want them to cover it up.”



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