

UK: Grenfell victims' relatives unable to commemorate loved-ones due to government anti-immigration policies

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The first phase of the public inquiry into the Grenfell Tower inferno heard family and friends of the victims remembering their loved ones. However, some bereaved relatives, who were set to be core participants at the inquiry, are still waiting to be granted their formal right to enter the UK.

Karim Khalloufi, a Moroccan national whose sister Khadija perished in the Grenfell fire, was unable to attend the start of the inquiry because the Home Office did not grant him a visa, despite applying four months ago. This meant that Karim's commemoration of Khadija was delivered by the family solicitor, Balvinder Khan. She said: "He is very, very upset that he cannot be here, he prepared the pen portrait, he wanted to present it on behalf of his sister. There is no other family here in the UK who could read it out on his behalf."

Karim's statement closed with the following words: "Today it is nearly five months since I and my mother applied for a visa to the UK. We had been led to believe that we could be in London for the inquiry, but now [this] does not seem to be the case. No one seems to care about our history or relationship to this case, or to care about our pain, our heartache or our desire for answers. I am now at a loss as to what I can do to defend my family's rights in this case and to represent my sister, who seems to have no representation."

Given the fact that only a small number of families required assistance with a visa to attend the inquiry—first announced nearly a year ago—it is difficult to interpret the Home Office's actions in any other way than deliberate obstruction.

After the *Independent* newspaper contacted the Home Office on May 18, Karim and his mother, Zohra Rabbae, were finally granted visas so that they could act as core participants in the inquiry. But these visas were not

printed until May 23—a full two days after the hearings started. The visas, they were told, would be printed and ready to collect from the British embassy in Rabat on that date. The journey to the UK from the Maghreb would then take another day or two.

Earlier in May, Karim said he felt "crushed" after waiting months without success to hear from the Home Office about a visa he applied for in December 2017. He and his mother had been granted six-month visas in the aftermath of the tragedy, but returned to Morocco when these expired, believing in good faith that they could successfully reapply to return for the inquiry.

Karim spent £1,200 to have his own and his mother's applications processed. Speaking to the *Independent*, he said, "I'm happy that I can attend at least some of the inquiry. Let's hope that they don't delay it anymore. I'm angry it took so long; there was no reason for this delay. We have been suffering, waiting; they have been confusing us. I don't even think my mum will come now. After all this, she is afraid to go back to Britain. She's afraid there will be more issues."

Balvinder Khan said she had made repeated attempts to contact the Home Office about the family's applications but had received zero clarification.

In another case, the Iranian husband of 59-year-old victim Fatemeh Afrasiabi was unable to pay tribute to his wife or visit her grave because his immigration application was refused. Fatemah Afrasiabi was visiting from Iran when the tower block was consumed by fire and died alongside her sister, 65-year-old Sakineh Afrasiabi.

Fatemeh's son, Mohammed Samimi, explained to the inquiry: "I wanted to take this opportunity to remember my father, who could not come to the UK, his visa application was refused, and he says that, 'I am spending my days and nights by the thought of my children and I

want to be able to visit my wife's grave.”

Khan and other solicitors representing bereaved relatives had been under the impression that the Home Office would introduce a policy to automatically grant family members who had been granted core participant status the right to be in the UK.

However, following a cabinet reshuffle in December, the Home Office quietly dropped these promises. The change was never made public, but an email from a staff member at the government's Grenfell victims unit, addressed to a lawyer at North Kensington Law Centre—and since viewed by journalists—confirms the policy will not be introduced.

The email stated, “Relatives would be able to stay in the UK for a maximum of six months, after which time they would be expected to return home or apply for time limited leave under an existing immigration route.”

Many Grenfell relatives who live abroad are being subjected to unnecessary but deliberate levels of stress by the Home Office. Other bereaved family members who came to Britain in the immediate aftermath of the tragedy are still waiting to hear whether their visas will be renewed, meaning they face continuing uncertainty.

The government's pledge to make it easier for relatives to visit the UK was made in the immediate aftermath of a fire that was widely seen as a preventable disaster resulting from institutionalized indifference and neglect. Facing furious demands by local residents for justice, the government said visas would be granted without delay. But the Home Office has since changed its policy so that core participants entitled to give evidence may not be able to do so.

A lawyer from North Kensington Law Centre, a free legal service that has provided advice to families following the fire, said: “The Home Office should have dealt with these individuals with compassion and sensitivity. Instead, with just days until the Grenfell Inquiry starts, it is outrageous that they've been left in limbo and are still unsure whether they can stay in the country to participate in the Inquiry in which they are core participants.”

Guidance published March 23 by the Home Office states that decisions on applications from core participants for leave to enter or remain in the UK must be “timely” to ensure that relatives are able to attend. However, it ensured a caveat was added that not all relatives with core participant status would be required to attend in person, as the sessions would be “live-streamed, enabling those who wish to view it to do so from outside the UK.”

The Home Office said family members of the bereaved and survivors of the tragedy who were coming to the end of their visas were able to apply to extend their stay under existing immigration policies. However, these applications would be considered on a case-by-case basis.

Government policies bringing about heartache for Grenfell relatives are having the very impact the government desired—making it more difficult for those who wish to visit friends and family living in the UK. These delays are the deliberate result of government policies designed to victimise, demonise and ultimately expel immigrants from British shores.

The tightening of immigration legislation is part of a policy of creating—in the words of Prime Minister Theresa May from a 2012 speech she gave as Home Secretary—a “really hostile environment” for “illegal” immigrants. This was necessary, she had stated, “after 13 years of uncontrolled mass immigration.” These draconian restrictions were directed not just against people who correctly believed they had full citizenship rights, but against all immigrants regardless of their country of origin. Central to this new policy was the aim of making it infinitely more difficult and inconvenient to visit friends and relatives who had migrated to the UK.

The Conservative government led by David Cameron pledged to bring net immigration down to the “tens of thousands” as part of deliberate efforts to divide the working class and deflect from its own role in imposing mass austerity. In 2013, the anti-immigrant atmosphere being whipped up was epitomized by advertising vans—introduced at May's instruction—driven through British towns and cities with large immigrant communities that ominously displayed large posters reading “Go Home or Face Arrest”



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