

“My mum and my sister were murdered and cremated on 14 June last year”

## UK: Final tributes to victims of Grenfell fire denounce corporate and political elite

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5 June 2018

The first phase of the Grenfell Tower inquiry ended last week with final commemorations by relatives of the victims of the fire.

Testimony has repeatedly included denunciations of the ruling elite for the social murder that claimed at least 72 lives last June 14.

Eslah Elgwahry and her daughter Mariem lived in flat 196 of the tower. Eslah’s son and Mariem’s brother, Ahmed Elgwahry, himself a former Grenfell resident, spoke in tribute.

Ahmed highlighted the catastrophic implications of the use of flammable cladding during a cosmetic refurbishment carried out by the management body of the Royal Borough of Kensington and Chelsea (RBKC) council, and changes made to the surrounding areas restricting vehicular access to the tower.

After being alerted to the fire and speaking to Mariem, Ahmed told her he was on his way. He then received a call from a “friend who I consider a brother who lived in that building for over 30 years. He has experience of living in that building and having experienced some fires before the refurbishment. Now I’m certain the building was compromised.

“My mum and sister lived on the 22nd floor and he lived on the 5th. To have the building covered in flames top to bottom just verified my concerns, that my family were in real danger. Having lived myself in the tower for over 20 years I just knew something wasn’t right this time. Before the refurbishment there had been several fires, but none the way she was describing. Furthermore, they never spread; they were always contained in the flat where they started, not that I know

of any spreading previously so rapidly.”

Arriving at the tower Ahmed had “seen the backlog, the congestion, the gridlock of emergency vehicles and got out the car ...

“So, having already lost my dad, with the exception of my wife, I lost the two most important women in my life that night, my mum Eslah and my sister Mariem. My mum and my sister were murdered and cremated on 14 June last year. To be more specific, my mum and sister were poisoned by the smoke, they were burnt, they were cremated, and I had to listen to them suffer and I had to listen to them die. I had to watch Grenfell Tower burn for a couple of days, but particularly the top floors. If that’s not torture, then I’m not really sure what else is.

“How did the fire start? Why didn’t anyone save them? What if there’s a fire in our home? What would we do? When is Grenfell going to finish? What is justice? How do you answer these questions from your five-year-old son? What would your answer be? We are still waiting for answers almost a year later. How does not having answers make you feel?”

Of his sister, Ahmed said, “On the night of the fire I heard her voice for the last time. Today Mariem has no voice, now I am her voice, now I am voicing my concerns for safer homes across the country to ensure we don’t have another Grenfell or another Lakanal [fire]. We’ve been here before. Let’s not kid ourselves. This is a lot bigger than just getting justice for me, whatever that may be, it is about accountability and addressing institutional failings. No family—and I mean no family—should have to experience such a

catastrophic event which was entirely preventable. This was not an accident.”

The inquiry had already heard the statement of Hisam Choucair, who lost six members of his family in the fire. Among those speaking on the final day of commemorations of Sirria Choucair, Nadia Choucair, Bassem Choucair, Mierna Choucair, Fatima Choucair and Zainab Choucair was Nabil Choucair, a close relative.

During the course of Nabil’s testimony, a relative of the family collapsed, overcome by grief. The inquiry had to break while the woman received medical attention. Grief-stricken, Nabil struggled to give his tribute. An ambulance was required, with paramedics assisting him. In a video tribute that included footage of the family funerals and shots of the tower on fire, Nabil said, “We will fight for justice plus seek the truth and find out who is accountable for the crimes committed.”

He told the inquiry, “What was done on 14 June 2017 was very inhumane, barbaric and beyond an atrocity. Three generations of my family wiped out due to arrogance, who knows best, out-of-date laws, regulations and legislation. Yet they still don’t listen and wake up and smell the coffee. A loss to one is a loss to all. This affects everybody, for we are all equal, regardless of sex, ethnic origin, colour.”

The fire would never have happened had the lessons been learned from two earlier fires in the capital, Nabil said. “Had they resolved issues from the Lakanal House fire on 3 July 2009, the Shepherd’s Bush tower block fire on 19 August 2016, Grenfell Tower would have never happened.”

He concluded, “For today we will start to make a change ... United we stand, divided we fall. In solidarity, with dignity and pride, to get the overdue justice.”

Nazanin Aghlani gave a tribute to her mother, Sakineh Afrasiabi, who died on the 18th floor of Grenfell Tower alongside her older sister Fatemeh, who had been visiting her.

Sakineh was a 65-year-old grandmother who had arrived in the UK from Iran in 1997. Due to the Home Office refusing him an immigration application, Fatemah’s husband was unable to pay tribute to the mother of five.

When the blaze started, and they realised there was no way of escaping by going down, they climbed to the 23rd floor, with Nazanin saying “she believed that help

was coming from above to rescue her.”

Nazanin said, “As early as 2003, the RBKC housing department formally recognised and stated that, due to my mum’s disability and deteriorating health, she should not be housed in a lifted property above a fourth floor ...

“After being refused many suitable properties, after 16 years of waiting, she was rehoused in 2016 into flat 151 on the 18th floor of Grenfell Tower. By this point, my mum was partially sighted and could only get around with the aid of a tri-walker. The move to Grenfell was out of desperation and pressure from the council. She was to take Grenfell Tower or to be suspended from allocations for one year ...

“Our mum lost her life not only to the fire that night but to the corporate negligence by the very people who were to ensure her safety, the very people who said years before that she was not to be housed above the fourth floor of a lifted building. She couldn’t go down 18 floors of stairs on a good day, let alone in a fire. Her human right to escape was denied even before the fire happened.”

She concluded, “Grenfell was a gross criminal negligence. If we settle for this then we deserve it.”



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