

Grenfell Tower Inquiry hears harrowing witness statements

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The official inquiry into the Grenfell Tower fire of June 14, 2017, which killed 72, continues to hear witness statements from survivors, relatives and the bereaved.

The evidence, focusing on events that night, is harrowing and confirms the wider failings of the authorities that directly led to the catastrophe.

Survivors spoke of stepping on bodies on the single stairwell in the tower as they tried to escape. Helen Gebremeskel, from the 21st floor, explained in her written statement, that “most of the bodies I stood on were not making any noise when I walked on them... I believe that these poor people were already dead.”

Witnesses described heroic efforts by fire fighters, even as it was becoming apparent that their “stay put” policy was breaking down because they did not realize that the fire was spreading rapidly due to flammable cladding materials. Many probing questions were raised about the London Fire Brigade’s (LFB) application of policy that night, connecting this directly with the under-resourcing of public services.

Survivors have described a background of casual negligence surrounding the management and refurbishment of the building run by the Royal Borough of Kensington and Chelsea (RBKC) via its tenant management association. They point to a general lack of consultation and a lack of information on safety questions.

Testimony points to the chronic shortage of social housing. In January 2017, Leanne Jackson Le-Blanc, who is disabled with mobility problems, rejected an offer of a flat in Grenfell Tower as she was concerned that the lifts were unreliable and would be unsuitable. The Royal Borough of Kensington and Chelsea (RBKC) offered her the same flat in April 2017, warning that if she refused it again, she would be considered “intentionally homeless” and removed from the housing list. She moved in two months before the fire.

Like previous witness statements, much attention has been paid to the refurbishments—during which the flammable cladding was added to the tower—conducted by contractors Rydon on behalf of RBKC and the Tenant Management Organization (TMO).

Mouna El-Ogbani, who lived on the 11th floor, said there were no consultations on changes or refurbishment. Her husband, Youssef Khalloud, noted that no sprinklers were fitted during the refurbishment. He said that this was not raised during the refurbishment because the TMO would only discuss changes inside flats, not to communal areas.

Like many others El-Ogbani was unhappy that Rydon wanted to replace the boiler to a new location by the front door. She refused, and had the boiler replaced in the kitchen. She was also unhappy about the replacement of the gas pipes because they lowered the ceiling, reducing the size of the flat. “We were not happy about this, but had no choice.”

She said, “We never received any fire safety talk and I have always been told to get out of the flat, not stay in it in the event of a fire.”

Khalloud contrasted attitudes to safety at Grenfell Tower with those at the hotel where he worked. Every six months at the hotel he had to do fire safety training, and the fire alarm was tested weekly. “There was none of this in Grenfell Tower.”

He said no one “ever explained” fire procedures. No fire advice was given, verbally or in writing. He had never seen any notices with fire advice in the hallways. Another resident said all the fire signs “were rubbish.”

Khalloud could not recall any fire alarm test or evacuation drill prior to the fire. He said he was “surprised that they did not add anything in relation to fire safety after all the money they must have spent on refurbishing the buildings.”

As is now known, cost-cutting involving cladding materials was a key factor in the fire.

In his testimony Nick Burton, who barely survived after fleeing the building with his wife, Maria Del Pilar Burton, from the 19th floor, said he had never been evacuated, taken part in a fire drill, heard the fire alarms tested, nor been notified of an alarm test. “I was also not aware of any organised fire marshals or fire training for anyone in the block.”

After the refurbishment, the block’s fire panel no longer showed the location of a fire. On two occasions in 2017

Burton said he had to let the LFB into the building because there was no access code. The attending fire fighters were not deployed from a local station, which may have been why they had no direct access. Burton also had to contact the TMO for someone to come and assist them with the new fire panel. On one occasion it took 20 minutes for the TMO representative to arrive after the LFB had been admitted to the Tower.

Hoang Khanh Quang said she received no safety advice between moving into her 10th floor flat in 1990 and 2017. As she put it, “No one cares about teaching me about safety.” Sid-Ali Atmani, who along with Nick Burton spoke movingly at the Socialist Equality Party meeting on the Grenfell fire, on August 19, 2017, was among many witnesses saying they heard no fire alarms on the night. Maria, tragically, later died in hospital, becoming the fire’s 72nd victim.

Since the fire there have been attempts by the media to cast fire fighters as bearing primary responsibility for the deaths at Grenfell, due to the failure of the official “stay put” advice. The witnesses have been plain about the failings they saw, but regularly praised the efforts of fire fighters, who heroically attempted to save lives in an impossible situation.

Ambrose Mendy, whose cousin Mary Mendy died with her daughter on the 20th floor, put it most clearly. Their deaths “were 100 percent avoidable.” They were “horrifically killed due to a fire... exacerbated and assisted by the illegal installation of hazardous materials.” He noted with concern that such materials are still found on buildings across the country.

He queried above all why the “stay put” policy for tower blocks—which would have been appropriate had Grenfell Tower not been covered in flammable cladding—remained in place even when fire fighters were saying they had never seen anything comparable to this fire.

This policy, fatally flawed due to the use of cladding materials, of which the fire fighters were unaware, has been at the centre of criticism of the emergency response. Questions have been asked about why it took so long to reverse the policy given the circumstances. Witness accounts of repeated emergency 999 calls reveal confusion among despatch personnel.

In some later calls residents were more strongly encouraged to evacuate, but most of those evacuated did so on the advice of friends. Helen Gebremeskel initially went to her neighbour Marcio Gomes’s flat. Gomes, seeing the severity of the fire, later told her, “It’s either now or never.” Gebremeskel had earlier received a text advising her to stay put from Nadia Choucair, who died in the fire.

When Youssef Khalloud first encountered a fire fighter, he

was advised of the fire but not told to stay put. Mouna El-Ogbani said she was later told by a fire fighter to leave. When Gebremeskel told a fire fighter she had come from the 21st floor, he was “visibly shocked” she had made it out. Gomes stopped on the stairs to assist Gebremeskel’s daughter, who had passed out. Fire fighters rescued them. Gebremeskel said unequivocally, “I owe everything to the brave fire fighter who risked his own life in that inferno to save my daughter.”

Witnesses have begun to draw political conclusions from these events and the way they are being portrayed. Leanne Jackson Le-Blanc cautioned against shifting the blame onto the fire fighters and using them as a convenient scapegoat. “The fact they did not have the right equipment to be able to help more is a reflection on the government, not on the fire fighters. They are still honourable.”

Ambrose Mendy’s conclusions, however critical, also point beyond the LFB. Listening to the fire fighters’ evidence he wondered “why there was no structure” to the rescue operation. Partially answering his own question, he asked “why the LFB were so badly resourced in terms of training and personnel.”

This is a recognition that the primary contributing factor in the deaths were savage cuts to the fire service. Mendy concluded, angrily, “It should not have cost lives for lessons to be learned.”

The Grenfell Fire Forum invites readers to its next meeting to discuss these vital issues on Saturday December 8 at 4 p.m. at the Maxilla Social Club, 2 Maxilla Walk, London W10 6SW (nearest tube Latimer Road.)



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