

The Grenfell Tower Inquiry: Anatomy of a cover-up—Part 1

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The following is the first part of a three-part series on the Phase 1 report of the Grenfell Tower Inquiry. Phase 1 concluded last December. Phase two of the Inquiry opened this week, with witnesses from the corporations and organisations whose actions caused the deaths of 72 people granted immunity by the Attorney General from any prosecution that might result from their testimony.

Part 2 of the series was posted on March 4, 2020 and Part 3 on March 5, 2020.

The report from Phase 1 of the Grenfell Inquiry, limited to considering the events on the night of the fire, is a whitewash designed to obscure the real causes of the fire and direct blame towards the London Fire Brigade (LFB).

While the 900-page report is valuable in its examination of the types of dangerous construction materials used at Grenfell Tower and their role in promoting the spread of fire, it largely ignores or minimises the criminality of cost-cutting companies and a complicit Conservative Party-run local authority. Through their decisions to use these materials, they bear direct responsibility for the devastating fire.

A 40-page section at the end of the report is dedicated to remembering the 72 people who died at Grenfell Tower. Based on the testimony given by friends and family members, it is a moving commemoration of their lives.

The report provides a forensic, minute-by-minute presentation of the June 14, 2017 catastrophe. It is harrowing in its description of the horrors faced by residents and firefighters as they tried to escape or tackle the fire.

The report makes use of witness testimony from survivors, firefighters and Control Room Operators (CROs) to form its account, as well as transcripts from 999 calls and phone calls between trapped residents and their loved ones outside the tower.

Survivors and the relatives of those who lost their lives showed enormous bravery in reliving their experiences.

From early into the night of the fire, Grenfell Tower's inhabitants were already encountering terrible conditions, with the fire rapidly spreading up the building, and flats, lobbies and stairwells filling up with toxic smoke.

Nicholas Burton, who lived with his wife Maria Del Pilar Burton in Flat 165 on floor 19, was awoken by banging on his

door shortly after 1:30a.m. He was confronted by “a wall of acrid, black smoke” as he opened his front door, similar to when a tyre is on fire. Maria sadly passed away in hospital as a result of the fire.

Other survivors of the fire describe their efforts to escape their homes, only to be confronted with thick, black smoke, making breathing almost impossible and reducing visibility. Many were forced to return to their flats.

Samuel Daniels describes the agonising experience of being forced to leave behind his elderly and frail father, Joseph--who died in the doorway of his home in Grenfell Tower--as he attempted to escape their 16th floor flat. As Samuel opened his front door, “thick black smoke poured into the flat... [making] him feel lightheaded and caus[ing] his knees to buckle.” He called to Joseph to leave the flat with him, but his father, who suffered from dementia, was “stubborn and disorientated” and was unable to follow his instructions. Firefighters, informed by Samuel of his father's presence and illness, tried to reach Joseph but failed.

Transcripts from 999 calls show the impossible situation faced by trapped inhabitants with disabilities, who could not evacuate on their own and who firefighters struggled but were unable to reach.

The report describes the ordeal of residents who attempted to leave the building, before succumbing to the terrible conditions in the stairwells and lobbies. Lina Hamide, who had lived in Flat 74 on floor 10, tried to flee sometime after 4:00 a.m. Struggling to breathe, she made it down two flights of stairs before collapsing. She survived after being carried out of the tower by firefighters.

Yehualashet Enyew lived on floor 18 and made an escape attempt with his neighbor, Paulos Tekle, after 3:00 a.m. Yehualashet tried to help Mr Tekle's five-year old son, Isaac Paulos, holding his hand and helping him down the stairs with firefighters leading the way. With smoke thickening, Yehualashet realised halfway down the stairs that he had lost Isaac and began to lose consciousness. Isaac died and Yehualashet felt that he could not have survived without the help of a firefighter.

The bodies of many residents were later found on the stairs.

The report quotes Saber Neda's last heartbreaking voicemail

left for his brother-in-law, Habibrahman Abdulrahman, in which he said, “Goodbye. We are now leaving this world, goodbye. I hope I haven’t disappointed you. Goodbye to all.”

Saber Neda’s body was later found in the children’s playground on the west side of the tower. He had jumped after leaving the voicemail message.

In the last telephone call between Mariem Elgwahry and her brother Ahmed Elgwahry, who was standing outside at the bottom of the tower, Ahmed repeatedly tried to encourage his sister to leave. Mariem felt unable to do so: “No. I can’t get out. The landing is filled with thick black smoke and I can’t see,” she said. Ahmed believed that his sister had not wanted to leave because it would have meant leaving Eslah Elgwahry, their disabled mother, behind.

According to thermal imaging cameras used by firefighters on the night, temperatures in Grenfell Tower reached 1,080°C and photos included in the report show lobbies and hallways filled with dense smoke.

Firefighters attempting to tackle the fire did so under almost impossible conditions, with many testifying that they had never witnessed a fire of this scope before. Watch Manager (WM) Michael Dowden, in charge of the LFB’s response for the first hour of the fire, says in his oral evidence:

“There were probably moments where I did feel helpless... It’s a very, very difficult place to be as an incident commander when it’s just—it’s just relentless. We can usually try and control and get a grip on the dynamic stage of an incident, but this was like nothing else I had ever experienced before. The ferocity, the way that fire was developing, it was just relentless.”

Grenfell Tower fire Inquiry chairman Sir Moore-Bick noted the bravery shown by firefighters on the night, stating that they “displayed enormous courage and selfless devotion to duty. In many cases they pushed themselves to, and even beyond, the limits of endurance in their attempt to fight the fire and to rescue those who remained in the building.”

The toll on CROs, who responded to 999 calls, is noted in the report, and they are praised as having “borne the personal consequences of that night with remarkable fortitude.” Moore-Bick observes that the “psychological cost to them must not be underestimated.”

Yet both CROs and firefighters receive harsh criticism in the report, often targeted at individual officers, including the relatively junior-ranking WM Dowden, who Moore-Bick says failed in their professional duty. The Fire Brigades Union (FBU), in its response to the report, points out this “personalised micro-criticism of individual control staff detracts from the real failures. Control staff were under-resourced, not trained for such a fire and faced huge uncertainties on the night.”

Sener Macit, who lived in Flat 133 on floor 16, describes in his witness testimony the descent from his flat to escape the tower and the effect that the smoke-logged stairwells were

having on both residents and firefighters.

As he and his wife went down the stairs, with the smoke so thick that they coughed constantly and struggled to breathe even with damp cloths over their faces, they came across the bodies of other people on the stairs. Macit describes encountering two firefighters around floor 10, who despite his calls for help were unable to assist him, as one looked like he was about to pass out.

According to the report, many of the firefighters entering the tower to rescue residents were working far beyond the normal limits of their breathing apparatus (BA), with many wearers being deployed beyond the number of times that standard procedures allow. Many senior commanders expressed concern about how quickly their BA resources were being used up.

Firefighters deployed inside the tower also had significant difficulties coordinating their efforts with the command bridgehead, as radio equipment often could not establish a connection. By around 5:30 a.m., firefighters found smoke to be so dense that their radios were not working beyond floor five.

Tackling the fire from within the tower also proved difficult due to the ferocity of its spread, inadequate equipment and low water pressure. Firefighter Alan Sime said that by around 3:00 a.m., the efforts of he and his colleague, Ernest Okoh, were making little impact on the flames on floor five. They were having to fight the fire lying on their stomachs; visibility was down to one foot and they could not see their hands.

Two other firefighters, Oliver Desforges and Richard Mitchell, who had been deployed to the tower around 4:00 a.m., said that low water pressure had prevented them from effectively containing or extinguishing fires in the flats on floor four, all of which were completely alight.

Firefighters struggled to use hoses or wet risers due to insufficient water supplies, and by around 5:50 a.m., Assistant Commissioner (AC) Andrew Roe had to make the decision to stop deploying firefighting crews above floor 12. By around 6:30 a.m., fire crews found there was no water above floor six due to a defective rising water main.

The fire brigade was unable to take control of firefighting lifts in Grenfell Tower, a problem which Moore-Bick notes “is relevant to the circumstances in which some residents came to lose their lives.” A 42-metre high aerial fire-fighting platform had to be brought in from the neighbouring county of Surrey, as the tallest appliances owned by the LFB—which covers a population of nearly 9 million over an area 1,500 km²—only reached 32 metres in height.

To be continued...



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