

UK: Grenfell Tower fire inquiry hearings end with guilty evading justice

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After over five years, 308 days of testimony, and some 1,500 witness statements, the inquiry into June 2017 Grenfell Tower fire has ended its second and last phase of hearings. The final deliberations of the inquiry before its report is drawn up by Sir Martin Moore-Bick will be “overarching closing statements” to be taken during the week of November 7.

The first and most important phase of a state orchestrated cover-up is now complete. Over five years since 72 people died in London in an act of social murder, not a single person in corporate and political circles responsible for turning the building into a death trap has been arrested, let alone prosecuted.

The inquiry bore witness to endless self-justifications by corporate and government bodies, shamelessly passing the buck for the use of shoddy, dangerous and illegal materials on the refurbishment of the tower even as documents confirmed that residents’ concern about safety were treated with contempt.

The last three weeks of the inquiry were given over to heart-rending accounts of the survivors and the last moments of the victims.

Kamru Miah, 79, was in ill-health but had to make do with an upper floor flat. His wife, Rabeya Begum came from Bangladesh, and they lived with their children Mohammed Hamid, 28, Mohammed Hanif, 26, and Husna Begum. A 999 operator called their pitch-black flat to tell them, “There’s someone coming up to help you.” No one came. Kamru recited from the Qur’an, and Husna telephoned her brother Hakim, “Please forgive me if I ever hurt you, but I don’t think we’re going to make it.”

Bassem and Nadia Choucair and their daughters Mierna, Fatima, and Zainab lived in flat 193 on the 22nd floor near Nadia’s mother Sirria in 191. Born in Lebanon, Sirria had worked in catering at the Royal Marsden Hospital, and Bassem was section coordinator at a branch of Marks and Spencer. He texted colleagues on the night of the fire to let them know he would not be in the next day and to arrange alternate plans. At 2.37am, as the smoke became intolerable,

Nadia rang 999 and asked, “Can the helicopter take us, please?” They were told there would be no helicopter and were advised to leave. By then it was too late and the entire family of six died together.

Gloria Trevison, 26, and Marco Gottardi, 27, were Italian architects who had arrived in England in March 2017 and moved into the tower in April, three months before the fire. Gloria’s work in the restoration of old buildings had been deemed “exceptional” by the principal at Peregrine Bryant Architects. Gloria and Marco both phoned their parents, who were watching the conflagration live on television. Gloria’s gold heart pendant was found along with her remains next to Marco, and returned to her family.

Abdulaziz El-Wahabi, 52, worked as a night porter in University College, London. His wife Faouzia had “serious culinary skills” and was “able to create mouthwatering dishes from all over the world”. Money earned from her knitting and crocheting of clothes sold at the local Portobello Road market was ploughed back into the community. Their daughter Nur Huda was an “incredibly skilled, aggressive and agile” footballer, who recently sat her GCSE’s. In one of several 999 calls, Abdulaziz said, “I could have got out a long time ago but they said stay in the flat, stay in the flat. We didn’t leave.” The family was found in the wreckage lying in bed together, along with their other children, Yasin and Mehdi.

Eight people died in flat 205, home of Mohamed and Shakila Neda and their son Farhad. Mohamed had been a high-ranking officer in the Afghan army. He fled the Taliban in 1998 and began work as a minicab driver before establishing a chauffeuring business. He had earlier broken his Ramadan fast at his sister’s house, only returning at 12:52am, two minutes before the first 999 call. The three were soon joined by Eslah Elgwahry and her daughter Mariem, as well as sisters Sakina Afrasehabi and Fatemeh Afrasiabi from the 18th floor. Several called 999, but they were advised to “stay put.” Seven of the eight were found dead together, while Farhad fell to his death from the 23rd floor. He had stayed with the four women because two of

them were disabled. He had sent his brother-in-law a final voicemail, “I am leaving this world, goodbye.”

Closing the inquiry Moore-Bick declared, “As the hearings come to an end, we enter the next stage of our work and it may appear to some that the inquiry is no longer active, but I want to assure you this is not the case... The inquiry has disclosed to core participants over 300,000 documents, all of which are considered to be of relevance in one way or another to the matters under investigation.”

He added, “The Panel’s task, with the assistance of the Inquiry team and its assessors, is to digest all that material, and identify the causes of the Grenfell Tower fire and the responsibilities of those involved.”

The task would be to “identify and evaluate the underlying causes of the fire” and “determine the extent to which... failures contributed to the disaster.”

Moore-Bick added that “criticism should be directed at those who truly bear substantial responsibility for what occurred” and therefore he did not know “how long it will take us to produce our report.”

This pledge, dripping with feigned sincerity, cannot conceal the cover-up set into motion by former Prime Minister Theresa May when she picked Moore-Bick to oversee an inquiry with no powers of prosecution and barred from investigating causes of a “*social, economic and political nature*.”

It has been painfully obvious to everyone since the immediate aftermath of the fire that a small number of individuals are culpable for the mass deaths at Grenfell, including the owners/decision makers at major contractor Rydon, cladding manufacturer Arconic, Irish insulation provider Kingspan, manufacturer of foam insulation, Celotex, the Conservative Party-run Royal Borough of Kensington and Chelsea (RBKC), and its Kensington and Chelsea Tenant Management Organisation (KCTMO) which managed the tower.

There is nothing in law that requires prosecutions to wait years until an inquiry reports, yet this is what the Metropolitan Police and Crown Prosecution Service agreed in dropping their criminal investigation. Any criminal prosecutions, should they occur at all, have been pushed back until Moore-Bick publishes his report--sometime in 2023, and six years after the fire—and are not likely to take place until 2024. Moreover, all those testifying from corporate bodies responsible for the fire were allowed to give their testimony on the proviso it could not be used against them in future prosecutions—making any trial difficult.

Some survivors have already begun legal action in the civil court system, and victims' families are calling for immediate criminal prosecutions. Last December, the Grenfell United

survivors’ group launched a nationwide “#demandcharges” campaign with billboards and a demonstration outside Kensington and Chelsea town hall. They issued a statement declaring, “We’ve been patient, we’ve stayed dignified but we’ve waited too long. Today we say enough is enough. We demand charges”.

The ruling elite, experts in the denial of justice using public inquires, are impervious to these demands. Millions of people still live in unsafe dangerous housing, but the government even refused to implement all of the limited housing safety measures recommended by Moore-Bick after the conclusion, years ago, of Phase 1 one of the inquiry.

While the bereaved families and survivors continue their fight to justice, for the corporations involved Grenfell is yesterday’s news and its back to piling up the profits. An analysis of accounts and records of Rydon, Arconic, Kingspan, and Saint Gobain, the French parent company of Celotex, showed that by last December they had posted collective profits of £4.9 billion since the fire, more than £1 billion a year. Their CEOs continue to rake in millions in salaries, bonuses and shares.

From the outset, the Socialist Equality Party and our Grenfell Fire Forum warned that the ruling elite would attempt a cover-up on the scale of the Hillsborough football stadium disaster in which 97 people lost their lives and for which *no-one* was held to account. We called on the Grenfell families not to cooperate with an inquiry that could never bring justice. All working people should join the growing numbers in the Grenfell community in demanding immediate prosecutions for those responsible for this heinous crime.

The WSWS has an archive of hundreds of articles on the Grenfell fire. We urge our readers to share these widely and to support the Grenfell Fire Forum, initiated by the Socialist Equality Party.



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