

IN THE GRENFELL TOWER INQUIRY

FIRST WITNESS STATEMENT OF GENARO BATOON

I, GENARO BATOON, DOB [REDACTED], previously of flat 146 Grenfell Tower, Grenfell Road, London, W11 1TQ, c/o Birnberg Peirce Ltd 14 Inverness Street, London, NW1 7HJ, WILL SAY as follows:

BACKGROUND

1. I am from Dingras, Ilocos Norte in the Philippines and have lived in the UK since September 2009.
2. I make this statement for the purposes of the Grenfell Tower Inquiry. I have given statements to the police to assist them in their investigations. I do not wish to have these statements submitted as evidence to this inquiry.
3. I moved into flat 146 on the 17th floor of Grenfell Tower in August 2016. The flat belonged to Larry Castro, also known as Virgilio Castro, who was my landlord and who I lived with. I have known Larry since 2015, and we met as we worked at the same place. Larry had lived in the flat for a long time. Larry has a daughter, Christabel. She sometimes stayed at the flat, usually during the weekends. Larry's girlfriend, Elisa Rabaya also sometimes stayed at the flat.

LIVING IN GRENFELL TOWER

4. Flat 146 had two (2) bedrooms. One was my bedroom and the other bedroom was Larry's. My bedroom was opposite the front door, Larry's was next to mine closest to

the kitchen and living area. The kitchen and living area was open plan and there is a bathroom and a separate toilet next to the kitchen. There is also a storage area near the front door. I have drawn a diagram of the flat layout and I exhibit this as GB/01. On this diagram Bedroom 1 was Larry's and Bedroom 2 was my bedroom. On the diagram I have also shown where the flat's only fire alarm was, near the kitchen. I have also shown in red pen the direction of the fire that night.

5. The bedrooms in the flat were on the same side as the school – Kensington Aldridge Academy (KAA). The living and kitchen area was on the same side as the Kensington and Chelsea Leisure Centre (KALC). There were windows in my bedroom, Larry's bedroom, and the living and kitchen area.
6. On the 17th floor there were four flats. I don't know the flat numbers of the other flats on my floor. I don't know anyone else that lived in the tower or on that floor. I knew some faces but I don't know names or who other people were, or what flat or floor number that they lived at in the tower. For example, I recognised 2 men who I constantly met at the Kensington and Chelsea Leisure Centre and in the lifts in the tower. We would greet each other but I do not know their names, flat or floor numbers. The 17th floor had two lifts, and a stairway which you have to go through a door to get through. There is also a store or rubbish area on the floor. There is a door to this storage room also. I have provided a diagram to show the layout of the floor and I exhibit this as GB/02.

2016-2017

7. Since I lived in Grenfell Tower I was not aware of any refurbishment, as I had been there less than a year before the fire. I used to usually take the lifts to go up and down as seventeen floors is too much to walk up. Often one of the lifts was not working, so there would be maintenance workers fixing the lifts when they had broken down.
8. There were two doors on the ground floor before you enter the tower. For the first door you would need to use a key fob to enter. For the second door, you would

press a button and it would automatically unlock. The first front door to enter the tower was replaced or repaired many times during the refurbishment. I am not sure if it was replaced with a new door. Before it was replaced the first front door was often broken. I don't know who owns the tower, or who is in charge of the building or maintenance of the tower. I can't remember much work or any checks being done to the tower during the time I lived at Grenfell Tower. I have never made any complaints to anyone about the flat or tower.

9. To my knowledge there were no checks or repairs done to the flat. The only time I do remember was once when I was in my flat and a gas or electrical man checked our oven. I don't know what company he was from. Larry had let him into the flat. He checked the gas; I think I had been cooking at the time. I don't remember seeing anyone checking any fire alarms in our flat.
10. I know we had one fire alarm in the kitchen. I can't remember ever hearing anyone else's fire alarms sounding.
11. There are no sprinklers in our flat or in the tower from what I have seen. I don't remember seeing any signs in the tower about what to do in the case of a fire. No one has ever spoken to me personally about fire safety or what to do in the case of a fire. I do know some fire safety from what I have been told at work; like not to use lifts if there is a fire. I don't know what fire doors are so don't know if any of the doors in the flat or tower are fire doors. I do know what fire exit doors are, but I cannot remember if there were any in the tower.
12. The only time I have seen fire extinguishers at Grenfell Tower is on the landing near the rubbish shoot. There was one fire extinguisher there, but I do not know if it worked. I have only seen this when sometimes the cleaner used it to keep the door to the rubbish shoot open. I don't know where the fire extinguishers are usually kept. The door to the stairway would shut by itself. The door to the rubbish shoot you would have to pull shut. I think it also shuts by itself and I think it has to be locked with a key from the outside.

13. I do not know or remember seeing a box which has 'press button if fire' anywhere in the building. I don't know whether there is any button which sounds any alarm to the building in case of fire or any other emergencies.

14. The 17th floor was generally clean, there was no rubbish or any items left outside on the landing.

15. Throughout my time living in Grenfell Tower I did not know of any fire before this fire happened.

14 JUNE 2017

16. On Tuesday 13th June 2017 I was watching TV in the living area with Larry and Elisa. Everything seemed normal and I went to bed around 10pm.

17. I usually only wake up when my alarm goes off in the morning or if I need to use the lavatory. For some reason, and thank God, I woke up early at 1am or 2am (it was now Wednesday 14/06/17). I heard some sort of alarm; it was more like a siren. I don't know what alarm it was, but it was not coming from the tower. I woke up because of this siren, as I could hear it, and I got out of bed. I was dressed in just my white boxer shorts and multi-coloured Polo sport socks. I left my room to find out what the siren was and where it was coming from. I walked out of my bedroom, past Larry's bedroom, and stood in the hallway facing the living area and kitchen. I was alone in my bedroom when I was sleeping and I could see that Larry and Elisa must have gone into Larry's bedroom as they were not in the living area watching TV anymore.

18. I could still hear the siren going off. I cannot tell anymore if it was the kitchen fire alarm going off or the sirens outside, or both. I remember the lights being off in my bedroom when I was sleeping and also in the kitchen. I did not turn any lights on in the flat.

19. As I stood in the hallway, just before entering the kitchen/living area, I saw some sort of light. This wasn't a light from a light switch, it was coming from outside, from outside the window. I saw from the window that there was fire and smoke. This fire was on the right side of our kitchen window, closest to our neighbor on the east face window. I could see smoke coming in through the window. I could see that the window in the kitchen had not been fully closed, and was slightly open, maybe by about 2 inches. It was open a little bit. It was usually left open a bit for air and ventilation.
20. There was smoke in the kitchen and living area. The smoke was like a black cloud, and was thick. It smelt like gas. The smoke began to affect my breathing. This made me feel nervous and worried about the fact that if I inhaled too much smoke it may affect my health, and lead to me not being able to escape. I stood there for about a few seconds. The smoke was beginning to fill the kitchen and living area. I was sure that the flames were coming from outside the window and I realised this was the light that I had seen before. The flames were red and looked like the flames from a grill. I could feel the heat from the flames from where I stood. The fire was burning outside on the wall and the smoke was coming in through the window into the kitchen. Smoke was entering the living area too, I am not sure if the window or windows in the living area were open too.
21. I quickly went to Larry's bedroom. I started knocking on the door. They wouldn't wake up; they took so long to wake up. There were no locks on any of the internal doors in the flat, but I didn't just want to go into their bedroom out of respect for their privacy. I was shouting at them in our native language Filipino Tagalog, as we are all Filipino, saying "Kuya Kuya" "gising" "May sunog sa bahay" translated as "Brother Brother" "Wake up" "there is fire in the flat". I was knocking and shouting for so long, it felt like 5, 6 maybe 8 minutes. I was now starting to lose track of time. I was panicking; I thought the fire had originated in our kitchen. I thought the fire was in our flat.
22. At this time I thought the fire was just in our flat. I had no idea what was going on outside. I could still hear the siren. I can't remember if I could hear anything else.

I don't think I could hear any alarms inside our flat, and do not think I heard any from other flats or from our floor.

23. I think Larry came out of the door first and I informed him there was a fire inside our flat. Even after I had woken them up, I was still shouting "Brother, Brother, Larry there's a fire" I quickly ran into my bedroom. I grabbed my bag which already had my passport, some documents, my mobile, flat key, fob and my work key inside. I left my valuables and many items which I had bought for my family in the Philippines, as I had scheduled a holiday before the fire happened to go and see them in August 2017. Larry said to me to call '999'. I didn't do this, I grabbed my bag, I didn't speak to Larry and Elisa again in the flat.

24. It was maybe now about 10- 12 minutes after I had first woken up, and I now started to leave the flat. As I was leaving Larry and Elisa were discussing things that were in the flat. I know Larry has some items of value in the flat. As I was leaving the flat I noticed that the fire was now in the kitchen and there was more smoke inside the kitchen and living area. The smoke was now thicker and blacker than when I first saw it. There was still light in the kitchen. I'm not sure if the light switch was now on in the kitchen or if it was still the light from the fire.

25. After I had hold of my bag I left the flat. I think I left the front door to the flat open. The front door to the flat was a heavy door, but you would need to be pull it shut for it to be closed and locked.

26. I could see when I went out onto the floor that there were people on the landing. There were about 5-7 people there. They were asking what was happening. I can't describe who I saw or what people looked like, at this time I was just looking out for myself. I wasn't thinking or concentrating on other people. I have no exact idea how many people were about. I do not know if they stayed on my landing, went back into their flats or left. I can't remember if the lights were on or off on the landing. There was smoke on the landing, less than what was in the flat. The smoke made it a little harder than usual to see people. The smoke from the landing affected my breathing. I think I was on the landing for less than 1 minute. There was no heat on the landing.

27. I started to walk towards the stairway, as I knew I must not use a lift when there is a fire. At this time I still only thought the fire was in our flat. I was a bit calm, thinking the fire is on the 17th floor so once I leave that floor I would be safe. As I entered the stairway there was smoke. I cannot remember if there was any light in the stairwell. I could see a few steps in front of me. I could not see faces or tell if the people were male or female. There was no stampede, but people were walking fast from the floors above. I also walked fast, not running, more walking fast down the stairs calmly. I remember feeling like I am about to faint. I can't remember which floor I may have been on when I started to feel like this. I had breathed in some smoke. I didn't take a wet towel or cover my face at all, because I was rushing and my adrenaline was pushing me to just leave.

28. I thought the tenants on the landing must have already been aware of the fire. I didn't say anything to anyone and I don't remember anyone speaking to me. As I went down the stairs I could still smell the smoke and it smelt of gas. I felt like I was suffocating, but not a lot at this time. I can still smell the smoke, but I could not see the smoke in the stairway. I am not sure if the light was on in the stairwell, but it was dark, so maybe the lights were off.

29. People passed me on the stairs. There were people in front of me, and some behind as I was walking down the stairs. Everyone was making their way down the stairs, no one was going up. I did not see anyone use the lift, as I did not use the lift. I could still hear the siren. I don't know where it is coming from. It still sounded like a siren not an alarm, like a police or fire service siren.

30. I remember on my way down seeing a Firefighter helping a man who had a walking stick. I walked past this man and the firefighter to quickly make my way down the stairs. It was an elderly man with a stick so he was walking slowly down the stairs. This was probably about the 10th floor, but I am not sure, it is an estimation. I don't remember seeing any other firemen inside the tower as I was hurrying down the stairs. There was enough room for people to pass him okay. We were going down single file, there was no commotion at this stage. I was going down the stairs quickly. Maybe it took 10 minutes to exit the tower from

my flat. According to the cameras in the tower I exited the building at 01:30:47. It's difficult to remember the time. The stairway can fit about 2-3 people across.

31. I don't remember there being anything in the way when I was going down the stairs, there were no obstructions. I'm not used to using the stairs so cannot describe them well, I have only used the stairs one other time, and that was when both lifts were not working.
32. Whilst I was going down the stairs there were maybe 20-30 people also going down the stairs. I can't be sure of the number of people as I wasn't concentrating on what others were doing. I can't even describe how people looked or their clothing. The only noise I remember hearing was the siren. The smoke stayed the same for most of the time as I went down the stairs. The smell seemed to get worse as I went further down. I was starting to cough as I was going down the stairs. It started to hurt to breath. I used my top to cover my nose and mouth, and that helped a bit. I can't remember feeling any heat. I was feeling numb. When I got to the bottom of the stairs I saw uniformed officers. The front doors to exit the tower at the main entrance were open. I saw lots of people downstairs, but I am not sure how many.
33. At the bottom of the stairs there was fresher air, I could start to breathe a bit better. When I got outside the building, that's when I realised the fire was not just on the 17th floor. I looked at the building and saw that the building was on fire. The police and fire service were assisting people to move us back away from the tower. I thought the fire would be contained; it was on one side of the building when I saw it. The same side as my kitchen and living area, the east side.
34. When I got to the bottom of the tower and outside that was when I heard people screaming and shouting for help. The exit I had taken from the tower was the glass door which leads onto the Leisure Centre on the east face, the same side as the kitchen. I could see other neighbours taking videos and photos of the building. There were maybe 50 or so people standing near the Leisure Centre.

35. After standing there for about five minutes I took one photograph of the fire. This photograph was taken at 01.33hrs and I exhibit this as GB/03. This shows that the fire is on 2 columns on one side of the tower. This is the same side as our flat. I was a bit more than 20-30 meters away from the tower standing by the Leisure Centre when I took that photograph.
36. Larry and Elisa came outside. They were safe. I then came to realise I was just in my boxer shorts and socks as another person, maybe a resident, offered me some clothes. I remember thinking none of the firemen knocked on the doors to wake us up; we had to get out by ourselves. Thank God we made it out; thank God I woke up early.
37. Larry, Elisa and I were in front of the Leisure Centre watching, and the police told us to go back. They put tape up where we couldn't stand. Some police staff later took our contact details, our name and numbers, as survivors.
38. I could see lots of police and firefighters. I could see the firefighters couldn't get to certain areas of the tower. I could also see that the water hose was limited to its height. They could only get water on maybe half of the building height and they were hosing with water only one side of the building. The same side as our kitchen. There were a lot of firemen but they could not get access all around the building. The police told us to get further back.
39. As I was watching the fire about 35% of the building was on fire, still only the side facing the Leisure Centre. I can't say how long we were watching for. I had lost track of time. The fire had now engulfed the whole building. It moved horizontally and vertically. The fire went around the side where the school, the KAA was, the north side, and then had gone everywhere very quickly.
40. The police were moving us back and had told us to wait for a bus that was going to pick us up. I was in a park area watching the fire. I could hear people from inside the tower shouting, screaming "Help". I could also see people in their windows, from about the 8-12th floor. I can't describe these people. I don't know anyone who lived in the tower apart from Larry, Elisa, Christabel and as

mentioned above, the 2 male residents who I met in the gym at the Kensington and Chelsea Leisure Centre; but I don't know their names.

41. The area outside the tower was busy, busy with spectators, and fire engines near the Leisure Centre. I was in shock, so there were lots of things I didn't notice. There were people, I cannot describe what they looked like or where they were, in the windows of the tower. I did not see any of them being rescued whilst I was watching. I remember seeing and hearing people in the tower who were above and below the 17th floor. I heard many people screaming, and saw a few people in their windows. I remember seeing the image of a person, I heard him shouting for help, and by his voice I knew he was an old guy. I later met his wife who said he was also Filipino and had survived.
42. I saw some parts of the building falling off, from the same side as my kitchen, but not much. I remember there being a lot of fire trucks but they couldn't get through to the tower. The trucks couldn't get close enough. Why wasn't there an aerial route to the tower?
43. After waiting about 20 minutes for the bus which was promised by the police for us to be transported for a relocation site, there was still no bus. Christabel's boyfriend came to assist us. He lives with his mother close by, near the Rugby Club. Me, Larry and Elisa went to his house. From his house you could see the tower burning from the balcony. I stayed indoors, I didn't want to see. I texted my work and family to tell them I am safe and what had happened.
44. A lot of Filipinos who lived in Grenfell Walk and mostly nearby as neighboring residents were affected and had to get out of their homes. They came to Christabel's boyfriend's mother's house. Christabel arrived at the house. She thanked me for waking Larry and Elisa.
45. Christabel's boyfriend's mother offered us some breakfast, Christabel's boyfriend also gave me one of his jogging pants to use. As I believed, I was not the landlord of the flat, I had no rights and I did not have anywhere I could stay, Elisa offered me her flat to stay in. After several hours of rest at Elisa's flat, she accompanied

me to buy some personal things like bath towel at M & S, food, toiletries and other basic commodities at Tesco and Sainsburys in Bayswater. I also bought some pairs of clothes, pants and shoes at TK Max High Street in the afternoon as I did not save any of my things apart from my bag that contains important documents as explained in paragraph 23 above. I stayed and slept at Elisa's flat in 14 June and reported to work the next day, 15 June 2017. Sometime in the afternoon, Larry informed me that he added me to the room list at Premiere Inn, so I slept there that night together with Elisa, Christabel and her boyfriend. With five people in the room, there is no room to think, I needed some privacy and peace of mind to think, so I decided to return my personal things to Elisa's flat the next day, after finishing our breakfast in the hotel and went to work.

THE AFTERMATH

46. When I was at work on 16 June 2017, my colleague Maria Alvaro informed me that she transferred some financial assistance in my bank account. I thanked them and I used such amount in buying other personal needs. While at work, my friend John contacted me and asked how I was doing. I was honest and told him that I am a survivor of the Grenfell Fire. Upon learning of my situation, he offered me his flat to stay in and I accepted it. After work, I took my personal things from Elisa's flat and moved to John's flat on the evening of 16 June 2017 and stayed there until I was booked into the Hilton Hotel. I learnt from the news and some friends that there were donations at the Westway Centre so I went there by bus on Sunday 18 June. I thought that was the only assistance I could get. When I got there, I got some advice. They told me that as I was a resident, I would be entitled to be rehoused as a victim of the fire. It was very organised, and there were charities there, so I took some clothes and basic toiletries. I went to Westway to see for myself what was happening. Maybe God was leading me there. I am thankful to God that I am alive, I am a blessed survivor of the Grenfell Tower fire.

47. Whilst at the Westway Centre, I registered with the British Red Cross. I was interviewed and was offered a room at the Hilton Hotel which was booked for me

the same day. I went to three different hotels before I arrived at the correct one that was booked for me as there were some errors with the bookings. I had to go from hotel to hotel with my baggage to finally find the correct hotel. I was also given some financial assistance, from the British Red Cross.

48. I stayed in the hotel from 18 June 2017 until I left the United Kingdom on 18 August 2017 to return home to the Philippines, as planned before the fire. During my stay at the hotel I was provided with 3 meals a day. Around my 4th or 5th week of my stay at the hotel, I learned from one Filipina survivor who is also staying at the hotel, that they were given financial assistance for food allowance to be used instead of eating at the hotel. Once I was assigned a key worker I discussed this with her, as I wanted to get food allowance so I could cook my native food at a friend's house. Once I requested this, I was given food allowance which worked out to be £150 cash a week from then until 18 August 2017.

49. I was offered temporary accommodation on 17 August, and moved into the temporary property on my return to the United Kingdom on 18 September 2017. I viewed 4 properties before I was offered permanent accommodation on 26 March 2018 which I accepted and moved into on 14 July 2018.

50. During most of my stay in the hotel I did not have a key worker. I went to the curve on the weekends to get information. The manager at the curve was very helpful. I was soon designated with Emelia and Amy as my key workers around 24 July 2017. It was easy to get information, but without a key worker it was not easy to get assistance.

COMMENTS

51. I am trying to pick things up in my life. The fact that I am alive is a blessing. I've seen with my two eyes the people that didn't make it out of the tower that night. The people asking for help. I don't understand why, when the 4th floor residents called the fire brigade, from that time why didn't the firefighters inform us residents? Why didn't they knock on our doors? Those people in the windows, they weren't rescued. I and the rest of the survivors came out of the building uninformed, by our own initiative, without any help. The number of deaths should

have been minimised or avoided if only the tenants were informed that there was a fire going on, on that very moment.

52. I was here on a working visa. That is why I went to Westway to confirm if I can receive any Government assistance for housing, after confirming I could with the Home Office, as I did not want to breach the terms of my visa. I would rather have been homeless and jobless than in breach of my visa. I can't at this stage describe what I am feeling completely. I am trying to build my life again and thanks to God I am alive and feel blessed to have made it out of the fire.

53. I consent to this statement forming part of the evidence before the Inquiry and also to this statement being published on the Inquiry's website.

STATEMENT OF TRUTH

I believe that the facts stated in this witness statement are true.

Signed:.....

g. b. a. m.

Dated:.....

22 / 02 / 2020