

## IN THE MATTER OF THE GRENFELL TOWER INQUIRY

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### PHASE 2 WITNESS STATEMENT OF BOUSHRA EL-GOURJA

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I, Boushra El-Gourja, born [REDACTED], c/o Birnberg Peirce Ltd, 14 Inverness Street, London, NW1 7HJ, WILL SAY as follows:

#### Background

1. Until 2008, when I got married, I lived in the Lancaster West Estate at Camelford Walk which my family rent from the council. Grenfell Tower can be clearly seen from our family home.
2. My uncle Abdulaziz El-Wahabi, aunt, Faouzia El-Wahabi, and cousins Yasin El-Wahabi, niece Nur Huda El-Wahabi, and nephew Mehdi El-Wahabi lived in Flat 182 of Grenfell Tower. They passed away in the fire on 14<sup>th</sup> June 2017.
3. My aunt Hanan Wahabi, uncle Salah Eddine Chebiouni, cousin Zakariya Chebiouni and his younger sister lived in Flat 66 of Grenfell Tower having moved in around 2001. They managed to escape on the night. We are a close extended family, visiting each other often and always staying in touch.
4. This is my first statement to the Grenfell Tower Inquiry. I have not given a statement to the Metropolitan Police.
5. I understand that this statement will form part of the evidence before the Inquiry and will be published on the Inquiry's website in due course.

#### Fire safety systems

6. I often visited Grenfell Tower and spoke to my family living there. I know they complained about the lifts and Faouzia would complain when she had to go up the

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stairs when they were not working. Abdulaziz and Faouzia were really high up the tower, on the 21<sup>st</sup> floor and there were many issues. My mother lives on Lancaster West Estate and the maintenance across the area and the response by the TMO was inadequate. I feel like the TMO did not take proper responsibility for repairs and for their residents. This is still apparent in the council's current response when comparing it to my mother's house against where I live.

7. I remember the family complaining about the newly fitted windows. They complained that after the refurbishment the flat was colder. It was freezing cold in the winter, worse than before, and my uncle and aunt would always wrap up due to the draughts and the installation of the windows not being put in inadequately.
8. I also remember my family not being happy with the installation of the kitchen extractor fan. I remember Faouzia saying it was a worse situation than it was before.
9. I remember my aunties' attending the Compact meeting for residents. Looking back at when we highlighted concerns about the escape route. Faouzia didn't think something as a catastrophic as the fire in Grenfell would happen. When my mum pointed out that she was so high and expressed that there was only one way out, Faouzia laughed it off, probably assuming my mum's phobia and fear of heights was what was causing her to worry and think of emergency options. I recall a fire at Camelford Walk in around 2006 when I was living there, and I recall the fire brigade came to the scene and the residents saw that the fire was contained. Despite this residents were told to evacuate anyway by both the LFB and residents. Faouzia came over to visit us after that fire with the kids to check on us. That fire increased her awareness of the risk of fires but she would never even imagine the scale of the Grenfell fire.
10. During the refurbishment when we visited the tower we would enter through the walkway door, above the main entrance, and we were confused when we ended up taking the lift to what we believed would be the 6<sup>th</sup> floor but ended up on a construction site. We then spoke to my auntie Hanan and she explained that the floor numbering had changed and that she was now on the 9<sup>th</sup> floor and my uncle Abdulaziz was on the 21<sup>st</sup> floor. There was confusion about the correct numbering on the stairs and I am not sure if they all got updated after the refurbishment.
11. I remember my uncle Abdulaziz and Faouzia complaining about the staircase when we

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would speak to her. They would often mention about how narrow the staircase was and how congested this would be if anyone needed to evacuate. From my recollection following these conversations there was nothing to indicate that there was a fire safety exit plan or that they were aware of one. They never comprehended that given the sophistication of the LFB and the stay put policy there was nothing to indicate that they would object to any advice they would be given. They trusted the authorities and the policies that were put in place to protect them.

12. I remember when I visited the smoke ventilation fans were a lot noisier following the refurbishment. I recall distinctively noticing this during and after the refurbishment.
13. There were problems in the flat with the electricity; since the refurbishment electrical devices were always shutting down on them. When an appliance would shut down they always mentioned it and complained to us about the situation. Their fridge would sometimes shut down and they would not have anywhere to put their food. These complaints were beyond 2013 (when people complained about power surges) and during the refurbishment.
14. I remember my auntie Hanan complaining that the boiler next to the front door made it difficult for my auntie to open the door. It was just not a sensible place to put it. I also recall that the utility cupboard in the lobby by the lifts made it a lot smaller. I remember kids playing in the lobby area but after the refurbishment it was not the same.

### **Emergency Shelter and Accommodation**

15. In the early hours of the fire, we received a phone call, from Avondale Park Primary school which is very close to the tower and where my husband works as an IT Manager. He received a call from the headmistress at around 6am notifying him that some students and a teaching assistant were missing and Grenfell Tower was on fire. My husband woke me and told me this and I panicked. I was in disbelief thinking it might be another building like Trellick Tower so I turned on the television. It was all over the news. I quickly called Hanan and reached her. She was distressed and told me her

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family had escaped from the 9<sup>th</sup> floor but she did not know if Faouzia, Abdulaziz and my cousins had got out. She just could not find them.

16. My husband rushed off to the school. Avondale Primary School was still open that day in order to support the families who were looking for their family from the Tower, and to help parents and pupils as best they could.
17. At this point I could not believe it and thought there was a possibility they had got out. I was in a total state of shock, since the fire was far worse than I imagined. I took my kids to breakfast club at their school and the other parents there saw I was in shock as many knew my family lived there.
18. I called my husband and told him I was going to West London but he insisted I should not come as he was worried it would be too upsetting and it was so chaotic. My husband joined my family at the Rugby Portobello Club and in a way he stood in for me at that moment.
19. The Rugby Portobello Club was a place where survivors and those searching for the missing came together and supported each other. Watching the news I could see my family at the club on television. As I spoke to my brother, Mohammed, I could see him on the phone. It felt like a horror movie. I was in absolute despair and trying to process the situation. Throughout the day, I was receiving different information from friends and family. There were numerous hospitals they could be sent to so I held out hope. I am yet to understand how the authorities did not know if they were alive. It was all bizarre given the scale of the fire how they were unable to deal with us, as they did not give out any information of where my family could have been. They did not support us through the process of finding them.

#### **Food and Drink**

20. The most help came from charities and community; lots of items and food were donated. I know the church next to the tower held a few meetings to support people and this was where the survivor's book was. The Al Manaar mosque helped and people would go there to break their fast, they and different community centres would host Iftar and in the days following we would come together as a community united. The council were not present.

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### **Psychological support**

21. I am not aware of any immediate psychological support for people suffering in the days following the fire but my impression was this took a long time to organise. It has been difficult since the fire. I briefly attended Grenfell Wellbeing at St Charles Hospital with a psychologist from July 2017 on a weekly basis but soon stopped due to the distance and going to the area was very hard. For my situation, living outside West London, I feel getting longer term support as been slow and only now since November 2019 have I been given a dedicated key worker. I have found the process of getting assistance extremely long and detrimental to my wellbeing.

### **Information and Assistance**

22. There was no appropriate way of communicating to us the situation. We were left in the dark with this false hope that our family maybe alive. It is at this time you think of all the things you want to say to your family, while you are left in the dark, and when you are finally told of their death you never get the chance to say those things.
23. On the day of the fire, from afar, I tried to support my family. I searched websites on the day trying to find information and by going on Facebook. There was someone who had posted on Facebook saying that they found my family. Someone was on a feed saying they were a nurse, and that she had seen people from the fire that were alive. She told me "yes they are alive" and so I private messaged her. Following this I felt like she back tracked and was then less assertive. I suppose this was to ensure the information was correct. She got back to me eventually claiming she worked for the NHS but said she had no records after all. This experience was very disappointing and people posting such claims gave families like ours false hope. I believe that people need to consider others feelings before posting any information.
24. I also called the helpline number which was displayed on the television for information on missing persons. That too was disappointing. The person on the line asked me the names of my missing family, flat and floor number. That is all the information they requested. It was a one way conversation and they did not even take my number. It was not a 'help' line but purely a way for the authorities to gather information. It was not

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devised to help keep loved ones informed and I think this should be considered in future. The only suggestion they gave me was to call hospitals for information.

25. I went to my local hospital, the Royal London, in case victims were being taken right across London. I physically went down to the hospital but they told me that nobody had been admitted in connection with the fire. We understood that there were issues with victims being unconscious and we (although in separate hospitals all) pleaded with the hospitals to ensure we could identify them. When I say we, (me and my cousins) all designated a hospital to check, so they also separated and checked various hospitals, while I checked the one local to me. I was told (by my cousins) that hospitals were taking in bodies but they were not able to disclose who they were for data protection.
26. I believe Zakariya went to the Methodist Church which had a survivors list in order to check the names. So that was another way of trying to find out information. A cousin called to say my family were in the book which gave us some hope, but we do not know who added the names. So everybody was motivated by this prospect.
27. In the first couple of days there was nobody from the authorities to help us find them, but then the Family Liaison Officers (FLOs) arrived at my aunt's house who gave us some information but it was basically bad news.


#### **Public communication**

28. Apart from the helpline I do not recall any other means by which information was supposed to be communicated to the people searching for the missing.

#### **Needs of Specific Groups**

29. I think the most vulnerable did not get a lot of support. My grandmother lost her son and grandchildren and there was no support given to her. She lived close to the area but had to rely on support from the family and community. To us it was essential to find out what had happened but it felt like there was no official way of getting answers and there was no support system, and so this must have been even more difficult for the vulnerable.

#### **Coordination and Leadership**

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30. When I went to the tower on the 15<sup>th</sup> June at around 9-10am, the base of the tower was cordoned off. But it was still an unnerving sight; smoke was still rising and flames in the tower were still lighting up. It felt very unreal. I met my family and other people, and those who came up to us would give us condolences. But I could not accept that. There was no indication at this point that they had died so we were startled as our main aim at this point was getting answers and establishing whether they were actually alive.
31. In order to seek answers we got in to a car at my mother's house with my cousins and drove to the Kensington and Chelsea Town Hall. Emotions were running high given all the trauma people were experiencing. We came to get answers and we wanted the council to give us some understanding or strategy. We needed direction and to highlight the lack of support system.
32. A crowd gathered at the entrance to the Town Hall and we understood that officials and councilors had gathered on the top floor for their safety. This did not help the sense that they were not listening to our concerns. Since the top floor is fully glazed we could see members of the council gathered. One man who had a broad build, wearing a grey suit, who was bald, and around 60 years old stood up against the glass, smiled and waved. It was a defining moment. It was an arrogant act and totally inappropriate in the circumstances. We were in shock as to how a person could do this given the desperation we felt in the crowd who just needed answers. This was the catalyst of what drove the anger in the protest. This act was a testament of the attitudes of the council and how distant and uncompassionate they were.
33. Me and my cousins (Senate Jones, Yousra Chaer-Yemlahi and Rajaa Chellat) went inside the ground floor entrance of the Town Hall during the protest so we could speak to staff. We spoke to a lady who worked for RBKC at management level, but I do not recall her name. We were taken into a meeting room and we asked her for answers. She told us that she had no answers at this moment. We relayed the behaviour of the council member who had waved and smiled at us. She responded that this was unacceptable and said she would speak to him. She appeared to either know or could identify him but I do not know if she did tell him of our outrage. I would like to know who this man was and hope that he made an apology. The police later came to the Town Hall and diffused the situation and everyone returned home. It was all very disappointing.

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34. That same day, we only found out later, the then Prime Minister Theresa May had visited Grenfell Tower. Her visit was not communicated and those early events already meant we had lost faith in the process right from the start.
35. The following day, we all went to my auntie Amina's house where we were fasting that day given that it was a Ramadan. Two police family liaison officers came to the house. They were speaking but when they were talking to us I was in a different realm given the fact of the trauma and not processing what they were saying. We were told that my family were not in the hospitals but some bodies remained on the staircase and indoors but there were access issues given the danger. When we were told they were not found in the hospital we knew that they had died. The FLO's were shocked when they first gave us the information at that point it was announcement of the fact we lost our family.

#### **Adequacy of Response and Lessons Learned**

36. My experience with the 'help' line makes me believe a different approach is needed. For a start it should not be called a helpline – no help was offered. It was also not clear if the information I gave was fed back to RBKC. In a disaster, the operator should be able to take your details and any form of information, and there should be a process by which there would be a call back with an update. It was the lack of information and waiting that added to the pain. Even an acknowledgement of my call and that they would have an update would have been something.
37. In my view, me and my family have not had the support we needed. We have been largely coping and licking our own wounds. Every day is hard. We have happy memories in the building and how the Tower was before the refurbishment. It was a fantastic community with no real divide between rich and poor. We were all blended. The decision to refurbish the Tower was based on the council's own selfish desire. At present RBKC continue to fail to answer the needs of tenants, and tenants should have their voices heard and concerns taken seriously. Council tenants are not given enough respect but still pay their rents. The attitudes of RBKC towards the working class and those who live in social housing is still poor. These issues still persist even after the Grenfell Tower fire.

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38. My overall impression and experience at the Town Hall was that RBKC were panicking and thought mainly of protecting themselves and their staff rather than talking to us. They did not think of the bereaved, survivors or residents and this was indicative of RBKC's own position and treatment of those living in tower for the years before the fire.

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

Signed: B. El-Gour

Dated: 26/02/2020

**Boushra El-Gourja**

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