

THE GRENFELL TOWER INQUIRY

**WITNESS STATEMENT OF MERON MEKONNEN
FORMERLY OF FLAT 163, 19TH FLOOR**

I, **Meron Mekonnen**, WILL SAY as follows:

1. I am a Core Participant in the Grenfell Tower Inquiry, and a survivor of the fire on 14 June 2017. I previously lived at Flat 163, on the nineteenth floor of Grenfell Tower.
2. I have already submitted a Witness Statement for the Inquiry, dated 23 May 2018 I (URN: WS00000912_0001).

Lifts

3. I found that there were several problems with the lifts at Grenfell Tower. They were constantly breaking down. During the refurbishment, we were constantly using one lift and all the residents would desperately pack themselves into the lift during school drop-off and collection hours, due to lack of availability of lifts.
4. Entering and exiting the lift on the ground floor was hazardous during the refurbishment as the builders would leave building materials, for example wood, and equipment on the floor. This created a tripping hazard.
5. I heard about other people being trapped in the lifts due to the frequency of them breaking down.

6. I recall complaining about the lift problems to a lady called "Linda" who was the liaison between TMO and the residents. She would always say that the TMO was waiting for parts. This happened frequently, so I cannot be precise about when I made my complaints.
7. The building contractors had effectively taken over control of one of the lifts, during the refurbishment, which meant that we only had access to one lift during the works, and this caused real problems for residents.

Doors

8. In addition to the information I have provided in my Phase 1 statement (URN: WS00000912_0001), I want to add that my front door was not replaced during the refurbishment. I think my front door may have been replaced before I moved in, but I cannot be certain. It was however the same door as the majority of the flats in the Tower. Mine was a wooden, white door with two long rectangular frosted glass panels coming down the middle.
9. The self-closing mechanism on the door (the perko) was faulty and the chain for the self-closing mechanism was not on the door when I moved in to my flat. I complained about this to TMO a few times, though I cannot be sure of dates, but it was when the TMO still had their office within our building. However, nothing was done about this. The response from TMO was always that someone would get back to me but nothing was done.
10. The door to the stairwell on the nineteenth floor would be often slightly opened, due to the wind or breeze blowing throughout the top of the Tower. There was an automatic closing mechanism on the stairwell door but the door seemed to be very light, so that during windy winter days the breeze would blow it slightly open.
11. It was also very windy both inside my flat and in the landing outside. I could really feel the breeze. I could also hear the wind and a whistling sound both inside my flat and on the landing. There was no strip or smoke seal on the door leading to the stairwell.

Windows

12. I covered the general fire safety issues I had with the windows in my flat, in my Phase 1 witness statement (URN: WS00000912_0001).
13. Not long after the kitchen extractor fan was fitted in my flat, I cannot be sure of the precise date, it started to make a crackling sound. I had a visit from a worker from Rydon and the person informed me that Rydon would fix the extractor as I was not the only person with a problem with the extractor fan. In fact, my neighbours were also experiencing problems. I particularly recall speaking to my neighbour, Debbie, in Flat 161 and she was also having problems with the extractor fan. She also complained about the noise from the extractor fan, and a draught when the fan was off. Rydon eventually came back and fix the extractor fan in my flat, which stopped the noise. I would still use it and switch it on when cooking, but I personally do not think it worked at all well. I considered it to be a waste of space in the kitchen.

Signage

14. I have previously referred in my Phase 1 statement (URN: WS00000912_0001) to the fire safety signage stating the “stay put” policy notice at Grenfell Tower. I can only recall seeing the sign on my floor, which was placed to the left side of the lift. All I can recall from the sign was the information about “stay put”, as this was the advice that I was most uncomfortable about when I read the notice.
15. There was one occasion when Linda, from the TMO, came to my flat with a man from either the TMO or Rydon who was inspecting the works in my flat. During this visit, the man reminded me that there was a “stay put” policy in the Tower as this was the safest thing to do.

Escape Routes

16. There was only one staircase in the Tower. This always concerned me, as there were several people living in the Tower and I worried about a single escape route. It also worried me that

there were no windows and there were no lights in the stairwell, not even emergency lights when there was a power cut within the building.

17. There was one occasion during the refurbishment works where the lights in the entire Tower were out and Linda had to escort me back to my flat using a torch, as the stairwell was in complete darkness. This happened during the day, but as there were no windows in the stairwell there was no way for natural light to come through and illuminate the stairs. The communal landing area by my flat is also dark when the lights are out and again there was no emergency lighting whenever the power was cut to the building.

Emergency Lighting

18. I do not recall any emergency lighting coming on during my time in the Tower. We used to experience power cuts on a regular basis. I think this may have been worse higher up the Tower as I know from speaking with other residents on the lower floors, that they did not have the same issues or experience them as frequently as I did on the nineteenth floor.

Smoke control

19. There was a ventilation system to the left of my front door, and there was also another ventilation system on the wall directly opposite which was higher up than the unit on my side. Often, I used to hear a loud fan sound from the ventilation unit. This was more frequent after the refurbishment. It would just go off randomly and it was a very loud, making a motor-like sound. The vent was there when I moved in but I noticed the noise was more frequent after the refurbishment.
20. When the contractors came into my flat during the refurbishment, I complained to the builders as I was able to notice more food smells during the refurbishment. They told me that the fans were not allowing the air to flow the right way, which was what was causing the smells to come into my flat. The smell was coming in from the kitchen, toilet and bathroom, which were all on the same side of the flat. Rydon's contractors told me that they could not do anything about the problem.

21. There were no windows on that side of the Tower and therefore the smells must have been coming through internally, via the vents. The smells were the strongest in my bathroom.

Fire Safety Checks/Inspections

22. I am not aware of any fire safety checks being carried out in the Tower. All that I recall is the visit I had from the London Fire Brigade a week before the fire. I have discussed this in detail in my first statement, as well as the matter of smoke detectors ((URN: WS00000912_0001).

Fire Safety Advice

23. I covered the matter of fire safety advice in my Phase 1 statement ((URN: WS00000912_0001). I did not receive any other fire safety advice other than what I read on the notice (regarding “stay put”) which was placed by the lift and what I was told by the TMO and London Fire Brigade.
24. I had no problems in understanding the above communications, but the information was only provided to me in relation to “stay put”.

Emergency Shelter and Accommodation

25. I went to the Rugby Portobello Club (the RPC) on the night as this was the first place that we felt safe after I had left the building. I was with my girls, and Hiwot, Wintom and their children. It felt like we were away from the street, and we could gather together. I initially thought the council had initially opened up the space for us, but I soon realised that this was not the case. Reporters were there trying to get in to speak to us on the night of the fire, but there was someone at the door stopping them from entering.
26. We were immediately given blankets, and water bottles which were being loaded off the back of a car. We had seats where we could sit down, and we were offered tea and coffee. Not long after, my mother and Yohannes were trying to come in to us. I was approached by several people from the Tower, one of them was a relative of Amal, the others were the sisters of

Biruk and Berkti. Amal and her family died in the fire, and so did Biruk and Berkti. The children had been picked up by Yohannes at this point and we left to look for the missing children. My girls' violin teacher, Lucy, also came and joined us to look for the children.

27. I went to the Clement James Centre (CJC), as I had heard that some children were missing from the Tower and could not be found. I therefore went there as I heard that there were children there. I wanted to help. Unfortunately, the children we were trying to look for were not there. I was only there for a few minutes, I had a look inside and left.
28. I also went to the Harrow Club to look for the missing children. I only went there on the night of the fire and they gave me and others hot drinks and we sat there for a while and talked.
29. I went to Latymer Community Church with my partner, Yohannes, a few weeks after the fire as they were handing out money which they had raised for the residents. I stood outside, Yohannes walked in and spoke with them. I had no interaction with people in the church.
30. Yohannes and I went to the Notting Hill Methodist Church a few weeks after the fire, as they were handing out money and clothes to help us and other residents. I went inside. They were really nice and helpful people.
31. I returned to the RPC in the morning. There were a lot of people on the street, lots of press trying to stop me and others to interview us. We were in shock. I do not recall the time passing. All of our friends and family were there, as they wanted to come and see that we were all right. Sometime later we left. I recall that our local church priest came and he prayed with us.
32. People from the TMO came along afterwards, I cannot remember the time. They sat us in a row to talk to us to try and accommodate us. The lady I spoke with cried. She was really nice, and she said she was going to try and put us up in a hotel.
33. Initially, the first few hours after the fire, we thought that everyone would make it out of the Tower as there were so many fire fighters and rescuers around. Everyone was discussing where friends and neighbours were. Somebody came up with the idea to create a chart on the

wall listing the people who we had seen outside, and their flat numbers. This idea came from the residents, who were assisted by the staff at the RPC.

34. We had no clear information about who made it out of the Tower and who had not. A few days later, I noticed that I had not seeing my neighbour, Debbie Lamprel. I went to the police to report Debbie as missing.
35. Some days later I saw a photograph of my neighbour, Fatima, on the wall near where all the photographs and flowers were being placed by relatives. This was the first time I realised that Fatima might not have made it out.
36. I heard rumours but nothing concrete about the missing people. We were just desperate for information. It took a long time and for weeks and weeks we just did not know what happened to our friends and neighbours. I later came to release that Fatima was all right, but she was in hospital.
37. I went to the RPC every day for information on the missing people. I did this for the first three months, at least. I also went to find out about the help which was available to us. They provided us with clothes, shoes, tea and coffee. There was a place provided where residents could gather away from everyone else to get information from others about who had and had not survived the fire. It was also a method we could exchange information on what was next for us in terms of what we could do and how to get help. RPC also arranged for banks and other services to come and meet with us, as we had lost all of our personal effects, identity documents, bank cards, cheque books etc.
38. The staff at the RPC were brilliant. They helped us and they gave us a space to be a community again.

39. All the people who helped us from the surrounding community were so kind and so caring.

Statement of Truth

I believe that the facts stated in this witness statement are true. I confirm that I am willing that the statement forms part of the evidence before the Inquiry, and may be published on the Inquiry's website.

Signed..... *M. Mekonen* 28/2/20
Meron MEKONNEN

Dated: 28 February 2020