

Witness Statement of: Elsa Afeworki
No. of statement: 2
Exhibits: 0
Date of statement:

GRENFELL TOWER INQUIRY

PHASE 2 STATEMENT OF ELSA AFEWORKI

I, **ELSA AFEWORKI**, will say as follows:

1. I was a resident of flat 16 Grenfell Tower at the time of the fire. This is my second witness statement to the Inquiry. My first statement was submitted in Phase 1, and is dated 21 May 2018, with the unique reference number IWS00000280.
2. I also provided three witness statements to the Metropolitan Police Service which have been disclosed to the Inquiry and published on the Inquiry's website: MET00006341 (dated 18 June 2017), MET00007934 (dated 12 November 2017), and MET00010321 (dated 17 April 2018).

Background and Refurbishment

3. This statement is a factual statement prepared for the Grenfell Tower Inquiry dealing with modules 3 and 4 in Phase 2 only. It does not, and is not intended to set out my full experiences on the night of the fire or the impact that these events and the aftermath have had on me.
4. I moved into flat 16 Grenfell Tower in around February 2015. Behailu Kebede was the named, and main, tenant of flat 16, and so I left most of the things to do with the flat to him. He was the person who communicated with the council and the TMO about any issues that arose in the flat.

5. I believe that the refurbishment of the Tower had already started when I moved in. I did not know why they were doing the works and I did not attend any meetings where the works were discussed.
6. I think that the windows in flat 16 had already been replaced by the time I moved in. I do not remember the boiler being replaced. It was always in the kitchen. I did not have any contact with the workmen who were in the Tower because I was at work during the day. I think they might have carried out the works in our flat while I was out.

Fire Safety

7. I never received any information from the TMO, the council or other residents about what to do in case of a fire, or about the mechanisms in the tower to prevent a fire. Although, as I was not a tenant, I did not communicate directly with the TMO anyway. I was not aware of any fire safety checks having been undertaken while I lived in the Tower and I made no complaints about fire safety.
8. I am unable to comment any further on issues relevant to Module 3.

Aftermath

9. In this section, I discuss issues relevant to Module 4 of the Inquiry's list of modules, and issue 13 on the list of issues dated 25 September 2019.
10. I referred to the events immediately following the fire in my first witness statement from paragraph 35, and I expand upon that here.

Emergency Shelter and Accommodation

11. After managing to escape from Grenfell Tower on the night of the 14th June, I stood at the base of the Tower with other residents and locals to the area watching the fire engulf the building. I witnessed both those pressed against their windows, still trapped, and screaming for help, and the emergency services arriving at the scene also struggling to comprehend what was happening. I will never forget what I saw that night. Almost three years on, those events continue to cause me tremendous physical and emotional trauma, pain and anxiety.

12. I stayed at the base of the Tower for several hours before my friend's son collected me and took me to his family's house in Shepherd's Bush, where I remained for the rest of the night.
13. The next day I went to the Rugby Portobello Club to report that I was a resident and had made it out of the Tower. By that time, they had started to make a list of residents, and people were ticking off names to work out who were still missing.
14. On the night of 15th June and the following night I slept at the Westway Centre, [REDACTED]
[REDACTED] There were lots of people sleeping at the Westway, including children. I was not able to sleep – I just lay on the floor all night. I was still in shock about what had happened, and this stopped me from being able to sleep. I remember that there were lots of NHS staff who were at the Westway, but I don't remember receiving a medical check at that time.
15. Everything was chaotic and hectic, but it was an emergency situation and so people were dealing with unexpected things. It was a very difficult time and I was in such a state of shock. The focus was on children and disabled people, which was understandable. Everyone was spread out after the fire. I had my mobile phone with me but the battery was dead and I did not have a charger. It was difficult to get through to speak to people anyway.
16. For a long time we did not know who had survived or who had died. It took a while to communicate. It was a terrible situation to be in.

Moving to a hotel

17. I stayed at the Westway for two nights before I was told that I could move to emergency accommodation in a hotel. I am not sure who the people were who arranged the move and I cannot remember who told me about it. At the time everything was so confused that I didn't really know who was who. As far as I remember they just found the first available hotel and sent us there. I think it was someone from the Council who arranged it.
18. I went to the Holiday Inn, just off Kensington High Street. My friend Alemishet Demissie was already at the Holiday Inn and there were other residents from Grenfell

Tower staying there who I recognised but did not know, like Amina Mohamed. Amina quickly became a very close friend. At the time, it was very important for me that both friends and other survivors were there as I had become extremely anxious about everything. I don't know what I would have done without them. I only felt able to leave the hotel with either Alemishet or Amina.

19. Whilst I was staying at the Holiday Inn the police visited me a few times and spoke to me about what had happened. They were trying to find out who was missing. No one else visited me at the hotel and I had no information from the Council about how long the hotel had been booked for or how long I could stay. It was only by talking to one of the receptionists that I was able to find out some details. She was from my country, so I spoke to her a lot.
20. I had my own room at the Holiday Inn but it was a very difficult time and I was still in shock. I kept the door to my room open the whole time because I was scared I was going to be trapped in there if anything happened. I barely slept at all.
21. We were given food vouchers to be used in the hotel restaurant but I did not really use them as my appetite was gone. I do not know how I survived without eating and sleeping. I was exhausted and my brain was shattered. I felt guilty because I had escaped from the fire and so many people had died. It affected my mood, and I did not want to go out to the rest centres [REDACTED]
22. Following a week's stay at the Holiday Inn, the receptionist informed me that my room booking had ended, and that I was going to be moved to a different hotel. That morning, on Saturday 24th June, I sat in the reception of the hotel with other Grenfell Tower residents, waiting to be told where we would be moved to. After a while, a couple of Social Workers from the Council arrived and told us that we would be moved to the Raddison Blu hotel near Marble Arch. They called us a taxi to take us there.
23. I ended up staying in the Radisson Blu hotel until February 2018 when I moved into my current flat. I was still in a state of shock. Day to day my mind was somewhere else and I could not stop thinking about how many people had died in the fire. It was so difficult.

Food and Drink

24. In the immediate aftermath of the fire I simply did not eat. I was in so much shock and my appetite was completely gone. In the weeks following the fire I lost a lot of weight. To begin with, we were given an allowance for food to buy in the hotel restaurant. After a while, they changed it so that we had money that could be used elsewhere.

Basic Provisions and Financial Assistance

25. One of the first things I did the morning after the fire was go to my bank and get some money out. I brought nothing with me out of the flat, except the pyjamas I was wearing and my phone. Luckily, on my phone, I had a picture of my passport, and I was able to take money out of my bank account in person using this.

26. Another resident from Grenfell Tower who was staying in the same hotel told me that financial assistance was available at the Westway. When I went to the Westway kiosk to collect the money, the woman from the council who was there did not believe me that I was a resident of Grenfell Tower. I think she was going to give me £150, which was less than the £500 that I had been told was available for all residents to help pay for emergency items. She asked me to tell her what I was going to spend the money on, and why I needed it. It felt insensitive. I felt that she did not believe that I had lost everything. I was still very distressed as it was only a few days after the fire, and I ended up simply giving the money back. I was not the main tenant of flat 16, but I was living there and the council should have had a record that I was a resident.

27. I had a similar experience in the Rugby Portobello Club. Again, I had been told that I could go there to get some help. I arrived and people were registering the survivors and giving out donations. The woman who was registering people did not believe me when I said I lived in the Tower, and said that because I was not the main tenant I was not entitled to a mobile phone or a laptop. I think they had a list of the tenants and they were using this as a reference. My name did not appear on her list and so I had to go through my story again and again which was distressing and embarrassing. I understand that they had to be stringent with who could receive assistance, and that it turned out some people were claiming fraudulently. However, once I had been put on the list as a resident, I do not know why I had to keep convincing people. It made me not want to go to the assistance centres.

28. Later on I went again to Rugby Portobello Club with Amina as a bodyguard. We had to argue with someone to get my name on the list. It was only from then on that it seemed they accepted me as a resident and a victim of the fire.
29. I was given some cash for emergencies. I did not debate or discuss what was given and accepted this was their rules.
30. There were donations available at the Westway, including clothes, shampoo and other essentials. I did not really go there for these as I was in the hotel and could not keep things there. I had also already bought myself some replacement clothes in the days after the fire although thought it kind that people helped us and was grateful for this.

Support

31. When I was in the Holiday Inn RBKC sent a social worker to come and see me. Unfortunately, she was not very experienced. Her expertise was in dealing with children, and so she did not always know how to help me. She was also doing her own full time job and helping me in addition to her usual caseload and so did not always have time. She only came to see me a few times, such as when she gave me a voucher to redeem at the post office, or when RBKC wanted to show me flats I might move into. When I was still at Radisson Blu she left and the Council sent me another key worker.
32. It did appear that the people sent to help had much experience of helping people in situations like mine. I am not sure that they were able to support me as effectively as they might. I remember wondering whether this was because I was not the main tenant, and whether the more experienced key workers were allocated to main tenants.
33. Several months after the fire my key worker referred me to the Grenfell Wellbeing programme at St Charles Hospital. I did not find the treatment there helpful.

Information and Assistance Public Communication

34. At the beginning, I learnt most of the information from other people who were staying in the same hotel. Everybody passed information to each other. Sometime later, there was a WhatsApp group of survivors. These are the group that became part of Grenfell

United. People used to share information about what was available in the group and this was very helpful.

35. RBKC also sent letters. They would send the same letter to everyone, but addressed it individually and someone delivered them by pushing the letters under our hotel room door. At that time, it was very difficult for me to take in information because I was so distressed and so the letter was not very useful to me. My mind was just not working properly. The WhatsApp group from friends and people I knew was far better.

Needs of Specific Groups

36. As I have mentioned, I felt that because I was a lodger I was not a priority. At times people were very insensitive. For example on one occasion, a housing officer asked me to bring proof of address. Sometimes people from RBKC did not seem to understand that everything I owned had been destroyed in the fire and so this was just not possible. I was asked to explain my story repeatedly and it felt like I had to beg for basic support and help or that people would not believe me.

Adequacy of Response and Lessons Learned

37. In the aftermath of the fire, it was difficult for me because the fire had started in my flat. I remember that my friend, Amina, persuaded me to go to one of the first silent marches and many people were asking, 'Where is the resident from flat 16?' I felt attacked and as if people were blaming me. The result was that I would only go out in the community in a group. I was not comfortable going out on my own, in case people would ask me about Behailu, or blame me for how the fire started. People were saying silly and hurtful things about how he had not appeared in the community. I would try and tell them: 'Imagine that a fire had started in your flat? I know he did nothing wrong'. I am very happy that he has been completely exonerated of any blame for the fire in the Phase 1 report.
38. The fire at Grenfell Tower had a huge impact on my life, and being in a hotel prolonged the traumatic experience. I still feel the impact and am only now beginning to come to terms with some aspects of what happened. I now just want to move on with my life.

Statement of Truth

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

I am willing for this statement to form part of the evidence before the Inquiry and to be published on the Inquiry's website.

SIGNED:



DATE:

