

IN THE MATTER OF THE GRENFELL TOWER INQUIRY

SECOND WITNESS STATEMENT OF BEHAILU KEBEDE

I, Behailu Kebede, DOB [REDACTED] of an address known to the inquiry will say as follows:

1. I am making this further statement to assist Phase 2 of the Grenfell Tower Inquiry. I have made a number of previous statements to the police and this is my second statement to the Inquiry.

Grenfell Tower refurbishment and response of residents

2. I talk about the refurbishment in my first statement at paragraphs 22 – 33. First, they told us they were going to build the school on the Lancaster West estate. I didn't personally object to this, though when the school was being built, everyone was not happy. The school was being built on the car park space. Grenfell Tower had less space as a result.
3. Then the refurbishment was announced. We got leaflets about it showing a picture of how it may look, as I mention in my first statement at paragraph 23. I don't remember there being any meetings with the council or the contractor or the architects, or being sent anything to fill in, like a questionnaire.
4. There were some good things about the refurbishment. Before I suppose the building looked ugly. The cladding made it look nicer. Everybody was happy that we were getting double glazing. These were the good things.

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5. But there were bad things too and people became more and more unhappy. Before the refurbishment there were no big problems. If something was broken, they would come quickly to fix it. But this changed after the refurbishment.
6. I don't remember if there was a tenants and residents group when I moved to Grenfell Tower in 1992. There definitely wasn't one at the time that they started working on the new school and leisure centre. But with the problems with the refurbishment, some tenants and residents – including me – started meeting in the Community room. In my first statement I said the meetings were monthly but sometimes they were more frequent. We began making complaints as a group, as a team. It felt like that had more power. I never wrote a complaint myself. I felt they wouldn't listen to me by myself. When we complained, the Council listened a little bit. Sometimes they would ignore us – they would say they wanted to help, but do nothing. I thought it was a good thing that people were keeping pressure on the Council. We were working together as a team and it was more effective, it was more difficult for the Council to ignore us.
7. In terms of numbers, the numbers varied, probably it was usually 20 – 25 people, and who came each week varied too. There were regular people who would send out text messages and put up posters in between meetings, saying when the next meeting was. It was a real mix of people who complained about different issues. Everyone was angry that they wanted to move the boilers. Some people were talking about the windows. Other people were concerned about the communal corridors – they were putting gas pipes across the ceilings. Everyone was unhappy. One of my neighbours Berkti used to knock on my door, we would go to the meetings together and discuss what was going on. She was involved a lot.
8. We did various things as a result of the discussion at meetings. We organised a meeting with the MP in the Kensington Leisure Centre. Later on a lady came to our meetings from a charity, I can't remember her name. She explained about the building and tried to help by complaining to the council.

Windows

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9. As stated above, people were pleased to have double-glazing. But there were problems with the work that they did installing the windows, as I explain in my first statement (paragraph 26). Drafts were coming in all the windows underneath the window sills at the bottom. I told the Rydon contractor when they came to the flat. After they put sealant around the windows, it was the same – they didn't do a proper job.

Gas

10. I became concerned about the new gas boilers when I visited the show flat they made. This was about showing us how the inside of the flats would look, it showed you the position of the boiler and the new windows. It was the first time I saw what was going to happen to our flats inside. I was very upset about the boiler and the pipes. The boiler was on the wall to your right just as you came in to the flat. This is a small space and now there would be a boiler there. It seemed like you could almost hit your head on it when you came in the front door. Also having the boiler next to the front door didn't seem safe in terms of fire safety, given it was gas, and this would be the main escape route if there was a fire.
11. I also wasn't happy about the pipes in the lobby areas. They didn't look nice, because they were exposed, and we were all worried whether they were safe. Also they lowered the ceilings and so made the lobby areas feel smaller. There were also pipes running down from the top of the building to the bottom in the lobby areas that were boxed in, in what were like cupboards, which made the lobby areas dark and stuffy.
12. As I've described above, there was a lot of concern at the residents' meetings about the boilers. Some people said they would not let the workmen in to move them. I decided not to let them in too. The person from Rydon who came to my flat said, 'It's your responsibility'. They tried to put pressure on us saying this kind of thing. After meetings with the Council and the MP, they put the boiler back in the kitchen for those who complained, including me.

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Lifts

13. The lift was often broken. They changed the lift to a new lift – I can't remember the date. When I first moved in, it was very bad. I didn't report the broken lift to the Council, but I know that other people did by phone.

Doors

14. They changed my front door before the refurbishment. They said it was a fire door. You had to turn the handle up and lock the door yourself, it didn't automatically lock. I can't remember if it closed by itself. I can't remember if it had smoke seals.
15. The lobby door was very heavy. Everyone complained about that door – it was very difficult to open. It shut by itself.

Kitchen fan

16. They put a new fan in the kitchen window. It blew cold air all the time and you couldn't cover it. It was very noisy – people complained and then they replaced them with different fans. They would only give you a different fan if you complained. I complained, so they changed the fan to an electric one.

Smoke control system

17. I never complained about the smoke control system. They spoke about it in the meetings, but I can't remember exactly what was said.

Fire alarm

18. The council installed fire alarms in my kitchen and corridor as part of the refurbishment. As I explain in my first statement at paragraph 66, the sound I heard on the night wasn't very loud – it was like the beep beep that my electric meter key charger makes when the meter's run out.

Fire safety advice, notices, checks/inspection, complaints

19. I didn't know about the Stay Put advice. I don't remember anyone from the Council ever talking to me about what to do if there was a fire.
20. In terms of the fire notices, I am fine at reading English so I would have been able to understand it if I had read it but I don't remember ever reading them. On the other

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hand I did do what the notice tells you to do on the night of fire. It's possible I did this because I have taken in what's on the notice, even though I don't specifically remember reading it.

21. I am not aware of any fire safety checks or inspections being conducted.
22. I did not raise general complaints about fire safety, but I did tell the Rydon contractor about my concerns that the boiler wasn't safe. I told her more than once. I can't remember the dates.

The aftermath

23. I described the aftermath of the fire in my first statement to the Inquiry (paragraphs 123 to 132). Since then, the phase 1 report has been published. I am extremely grateful to the Inquiry for its findings about the cause of the fire and my role. This was very important to me after everything I went through and the lies that were spread in the media about me.
24. In this part of my second statement, I will address the questions the Inquiry has asked survivors to answer about the aftermath. It has been difficult answering these questions, because really I don't want to draw attention to my specific experience. It has been so hard for me being isolated from all the other victims and I want to feel the same as everyone else, not separate. This is a deep need I have. But I also want to help the Inquiry and if I am to answer the questions properly, I have to say what happened to me so this is what I will do. I hope this will help the Inquiry do its job properly. I hope no one in the future has to experience what any of the victims of the fire have gone through. But in case they do, it is important that lessons are learned about how to treat the victims. So I will answer the Inquiry's questions, hoping this will help the lessons to be learned.
25. In answering the questions, I hope the Inquiry will understand that my memory of events is not always good. Some things are very clear, some are not, and what happened when gets jumbled up in my memory. I have not seen all the records of the time, from RBKC, the police and those providing medical treatment. These are likely to have lots of detail about what happened when, that I cannot recall. I will try to assist

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the Inquiry by giving as much detail as I can now, but if documents are obtained from the organisations that were involved with me after the fire, I may want to provide a further statement at that point.

26. Also, when I talk in this statement about my isolation and how damaging this has been for me, I wish to make clear that I don't blame any of the victims for this. They suffered terrible things that no one should ever suffer. They were traumatised by their experiences on the night, they were angry about what happened. They had lost their homes, some of them lost their loved ones, some lost their entire families. I don't blame them at all. Those to blame are those responsible for the fire. The media played its part too by spreading lies about me and my role in the fire but this only happened because those responsible did not step forward and take responsibility from the outset.

Emergency Shelter and Accommodation

27. The Inquiry has asked what experience people had of the relief centres set up after the fire. I did not have any experience of these, because immediately after the fire I was looked after by the police due to my role in their investigation. I didn't have any support from a key worker.
28. The Inquiry has also asked about the accommodation provided and its suitability. We have been moved several times since the fire before being offered permanent re-housing:
- a) The first night after the fire, after spending the first day being interviewed at the police station, at about 6pm I was told 'You can go'. I said, 'Go where?' The police called RBKC and then said a room had been found at a guesthouse in Cricklewood. Because of the state I was in, I couldn't be on my own so my partner and children and me went and stayed in the place in Cricklewood. I was hearing voices, people shouting and screaming. I didn't sleep all night. In the morning I thought, I can't stay here. I asked to be taken to my partner's flat and the police took me there.
 - b) I only stayed at my partner's flat for about a week. Although there was not enough space for us, this was a good place for me to be and it was good for my

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partner and the children, because it was their home. But then the media found out where I was and I started getting harassed by them. I dealt with this in my first statement at paragraphs 115 - 122. They started spreading lies about how the fire started and about my actions that night. Then those lies started being repeated on social media, as explained in my first statement. It was very bad. I wasn't sleeping. I wanted to die. A few days after the fire, I was so bad my brother took me to St Charles hospital in Ladbroke Grove and they said I needed urgent psychiatric treatment. I was taken by ambulance to St Mary's. They gave me medication which helped a bit.

- c) The police started talking about putting the whole family under a witness protection programme for safety. I describe this in my first statement at paragraph 119-120. This made me feel very desperate and I told the police I didn't want to do this. I am not blaming the police. The police officer who looked after me, DC Eleanor Nightingale, was very very good and did a lot to help me, and I am very grateful to her. But my situation was very bad and I don't think RBKC was working with the police and psychiatric services to work out how best to look after me in terms of my recovery.
- d) The police then moved us into a hotel out of the area, the Holiday Inn in Hammersmith. Initially I believe the police were responsible for my accommodation, and then this passed to the council in around August 2017, once my involvement in the police investigation was over.
- e) We were in the Holiday Inn for about six months. In terms of the suitability of this accommodation, it was OK. We had two rooms - one double, one single and a cot for the baby - across the corridor from each other. This was for my partner and me, our baby and our daughter.
- f) The police told me not to tell anyone I was there, that I shouldn't meet anyone, and I should not go back to the area. I felt like I was under house arrest. Also other victims were staying at the hotel, not people from the Tower but people we knew and who knew us from the area. There was a Wetherspoons opposite the hotel and they were always sat outside the Wetherspoons. I became terrified of

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going out, if I had to go out I disguised myself. One time, I met someone in the street from the Tower and they said, 'Are you Behailu?' and I said 'No'.

- g) This was a very bad time. I couldn't sleep. My thoughts were too much, I wanted to kill myself. I was afraid of being recognised – but at the same time, my isolation was very very damaging for me at a time when I was suffering so much trauma about that night, such grief about all those people who had died, such guilt for having survived and because the fire started in my flat, even though I know it was not my fault.
- h) Eventually, people realised where I was staying and so we were moved again to the Novotel in Hammersmith where we stayed for about a year. Again we had two rooms next to each other, one single and one double, plus a cot for the baby. I felt very isolated.
- i) Then in about November 2018, we moved into serviced accommodation. We moved from Hammersmith to Chiswick. It was a little bit better in terms of suitability. We had two bedrooms. We could cook for the first time in eighteen months.

29. In terms of permanent accommodation, we began to be taken round places, but all of them, except one in Feltham which was completely unsuitable, were in Ladbroke Grove which the police said wasn't safe for me. My understanding is that the police officer Eleanor was dealing with RBKC about the housing situation, trying to help us, and she said we shouldn't be in Ladbroke Grove.

30. We were also shown a place not in the area. As the second anniversary of the fire approached, we were put under a lot of pressure to accept this place, even though it wasn't ready. We moved into the flat in June 2019 but work still carried on having to be done. It wasn't completely ready until after the phase 1 report was ready. This was bitter for me. Given that the flat wasn't properly ready till after the phase 1 report, it is a regret to me now that the final decision about where I should live could not have waited until the phase 1 report was published. Maybe I still would have needed to live away from Ladbroke Grove, I don't know. I am trying to look forward now and make the best of things. But I lived in Ladbroke Grove for all my life in this country, I was

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a taxi driver for over twenty years there. Because of my job, I knew so many of the people there, they knew me. I miss it so much. It has been hard too on my partner and also on our daughter, who grew up in the area. She has to travel further to school now, she has to live further away from her friends. I think perhaps it would have been better for us to have the decision about where we should live taken more carefully and with everyone involved - me, my family, my doctors, the police, the housing team. There should have been a proper plan. Maybe we still would have ended up living out of the area. But at least I would know it had been thought about carefully and properly, at least I could trust the final decision.

31. As it is, I can only hope that things will get better with time. There have been some ongoing problems with the flat but it is good that the place is now finally ready. We are settling in, the children are doing better. We feel a bit more hopeful.

Food and Drink

32. In terms of provision of food and drink, I had no access to the relief centres so cannot comment on the accessibility of food and drink through them. In terms of provision by other means, I can't remember what money was given. We were given breakfast at the Holiday Inn but no other meals.
33. I didn't receive food payments for a while. The money would stop and start.

Basic Provisions and Financial Assistance

34. In terms of basic provisions such as clothes and hygiene essentials, the media reported that I left my flat with a suitcase, but in fact I had nothing. I left my bank cards and wallet and keys and ID in the flat. I didn't have any clothes. All I had was one t-shirt and one pair of trousers. Initially, the police officer Eleanor helped me a lot in terms of basic provisions. She did things like get me a new passport. She brought some clothes for me from the donations at the Rugby Portobello.
35. Eleanor made sure I received money from the charity fund-raising that went on and we were very grateful for that.

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36. Also RBKC did not inform me about the possibility of interim payments from their insurers. When I was made aware of it, I filled the form in wrongly, so the application was not accepted. I only got this money when my solicitors helped me with it later.

Psychological Support

37. I am sure that all the victims have complaints about lack of support after the fire. For me, the main issue was lack of support to overcome my isolation, caused by the fact that the fire started in my flat. It was a very very difficult thing to be cut off from everyone else who'd been through the events of that night. I was not part of any of the collective activities of grieving. I did not attend any of the funerals of my friends and neighbours. I did not attend the anniversary commemorations. Not being able to do these things, it made my survivor's guilt much worse and it made my trauma much worse. It made it much harder for me to recover. The phase 1 report has helped a lot but I still live with the consequences of being isolated in this way.
38. In terms of medical treatment, after my brother took me to hospital a few days after the fire, I was referred to psychologist Dr [REDACTED] and consultant psychiatrist Dr [REDACTED] at Hammersmith hospital. I talk about their treatment and how grateful I am to them in my first statement at paragraphs 128 and 129. The police officer Eleanor used to take me to see them. I saw Dr [REDACTED] every month, and Dr [REDACTED] every two weeks. They saved my life.
39. In terms of key workers, I was not given adequate support by them. Maybe this was in part because of the police involvement at the beginning. I can only say from my experience that a person in my situation needs a lot of very intensive support, to find ways to overcome the trauma, grief, guilt and isolation they experience. I was allocated a key worker I think about two or three months after the fire, but she did not contact me and did not give me a phone number on which I could contact her. I heard nothing from her. She was then replaced by another key worker who came to see me and left without saying anything – she just disappeared. We called RBKC and they said she had left. Nick was my third key worker. I think it was Christmas when I first met him, around six months after the fire. He did provide better support. He visited

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every month or so, he did things like he organised for relatives from Ethiopia to come and visit.

40. Another aspect of support that was lacking from RBKC was the provision of a respite break. It was offered but at a time that wasn't possible for me because of working with my solicitors on the Inquiry. Then they withdrew the offer.
41. I think there should have been much more coordination of support by RBKC. I am aware of one formal meeting between my doctors and RBKC - I can't remember when it was. I attended too. My doctors explained my situation. The key worker gave me lots of promises and said, 'We will try to help you'. But not much changed. I do not know why this was so difficult to achieve. It is difficult for me to help the Inquiry further on this issue without seeing the records from that period.
42. My solicitor and my MP got involved about the lack of support. The people working for RBKC's insurers then organised an assessment and said I needed things like respite and more nursery hours for my young son. Even though RBKC's own insurers were saying this, it didn't happen.

Public Communication

43. I was not aware of any kind of public communication of the services and support that was available.

Needs of Specific Groups

44. It would have been better if I had had an interpreter with me at the police station on the first day, particularly given the traumatic experience I had just been through.
45. A lot of the time, when I was dealing with RBKC there was no interpreter. When I did have an interpreter there were some problems with them being paid. It would have helped the authorities work out the right support to have an interpreter working with them and with me. It has been a burden on my partner to always play the role of interpreter, though it has been important for her to be involved in meetings because decisions about me are also decisions about her and the children.

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Voluntary and Community Groups

46. I was cut off from any such support so I cannot comment on it. I don't know how helpful it was to other victims.

Coordination and Leadership

47. I have no knowledge of the coordination role that Central Government, RBKC and the TMO had in the immediate aftermath and so cannot comment on this.

Adequacy of Response and Lessons Learned

48. I think more should have been done for all of the victims of the fire, in terms of rehousing, in terms of psychiatric services, in terms of childcare, in terms of financial support. It is very important for all the agencies to work together from the beginning to make sure people's needs are properly assessed and then the needs are properly addressed. As I said above, it is difficult to comment further on this without the records showing what was and was not done.
49. I also think that the experience of the victims shows the importance in the aftermath of a disaster of organisations taking responsibility for their role and telling the truth, from the beginning. They must think about protecting the victims, not protecting themselves. For example, Whirlpool did not admit any fault in relation to my fridge freezer which was their product, in their statements to the Inquiry. They were still not accepting the fridge freezer was the cause of the start of the fire at the end of phase 1. It was this that allowed all the speculation in the media. In this way, the organisations responsible for the fire itself are also responsible for the lies and confusion that were spread after it. This was very harmful to me but it was also harmful to all of the victims of the fire for lies and rumours to be circulated in this way. It sowed division and confusion amongst the victims of the fire. What we all needed and still need is the truth. It is very important that the authorities learn from this the importance of organisations involved in a major incident like the Grenfell Tower fire accepting responsibility for what they have done quickly, to protect the victims from the lies and confusion, to make sure the victims and their right to the truth come first. They must

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cooperate fully to help the victims rebuild their lives. This must be cooperation in deeds, not just in words. I think that they must be held accountable for their conduct in the aftermath of the disaster, as well as their contribution to it.

50. Finally, I think also lessons should be learned about how to provide emergency relief where the organisation supposed to be providing that support – in this case RBKC – is also the organisation most people blame for the disaster happening in the first place. I think this affected how RBKC responded to the tragedy. Everyone was very angry with RBKC, rightly so. I think RBKC felt defensive and guilty and this affected how they dealt with us all.

Statement of truth:

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

I confirm that I am willing for the statement to form part of the evidence before the Inquiry and for it to be published on the Inquiry's web site.



Signed:

(Behailu Kebede)

Dated: 5 March 2020

Behailu Kebede