

Witness Name: Abraham Abebe

Statement No.: 2

Dated: 28 February 2020

IN THE GRENFELL TOWER INQUIRY

**PHASE 2 WITNESS STATEMENT OF
ABRAHAM ABEBE
FORMERLY OF FLAT 44, 7TH FLOOR**

I, Abraham Abebe, will say as follows:-

1. I make this statement in relation to Modules 3 and 4 of Phase 2 of the Grenfell Tower Inquiry. In addition to this statement, I also wish to rely on my Phase 1 witness statement dated 12 June 2018 (on Relativity with URN: IWS00000847). In my first statement, I addressed many of the issues contained in Modules 3 and 4. I have provided more detail in this statement in relation to some specific issues. Where possible, I identify the paragraphs of my Phase 1 witness statement that correspond with those issues, and add any further comments below.
2. I have been informed that this second statement will form part of the evidence before the Inquiry and will be published on the Inquiry's website in due course. I have given witness statements to the Metropolitan Police Service and, as above, to the Inquiry as part of the Phase 1 proceedings. I have also been made aware that the Inquiry will apply redactions in line with the Phase 2 redaction policy before the statement is published and that I will be given 7 days to make representations on those redactions.

Module 3

Lifts

3. The lifts were very often broken in Grenfell Tower. I dealt with the issue of lifts in paragraph 38 of my Phase 1 witness statement where I stated:-

“38. Also, at Grenfell Tower there was only one set of stairs in addition to the lifts. If the lifts could not be used, for whatever reason, I worried that our single means of escape, the stairs, might be blocked if a gas pipe ruptured or that this could cause an explosion or a fire. That concern was particularly acute given that the lifts were prone to regular breakdown. It would be usual for at least one of the lifts to be out of order or for the two lifts to be broken at the same time. When they did breakdown, it would take at least a couple of days for someone to come out and get them repaired. The other lift would invariably break shortly after the first lift had been fixed.”

Flat doors

4. I had no problem with our front door from our flat to the landing. It was replaced as part of the refurbishment, and it was OK though I do recall that it felt light. Our previous door was a very thick wooden door similar to the door between the landing and the staircase.
5. During the refurbishment that wooden door was replaced by a white PVC/plastic door with a semi-circular shaped glass window with three frosted panes. I remember that it slammed shut very hard. It had a self-closing mechanism on it, I think I recall that it was on the top of the door, and the closing mechanism worked fine. I cannot recall whether there was a smoke seal or draught excluder on the bottom of the door.

Communal doors

6. The front door between the Tower and outside, on the ground floor, was regularly broken. A few weeks before the fire, the door stopped closing properly. It would not lock and would not recognise the fob that residents were given to get through the door. A couple of weeks before the fire, though I cannot be sure on time, the door was broken for two or three days. The door between the landing and the stairs were the old doors which were not replaced in the refurbishment (though they were painted).
7. The door on the 7th floor between the landing and the stairs worked. It was a heavy pull/push door. The way I see it, it would not be cost efficient to change the door. I am glad that they did not change the doors to the stairs from the landing because they would have cheap non fire resistant doors there.

Windows

8. I addressed the topic of windows in paragraphs 40 – 42 of my Phase 1 witness statement, where I said as follows:-

“40. The windows in the flat, which I understand were replaced as part of the programme of refurbishment to the building, were of poor quality in my opinion. There were gaps between the windows and the building itself, which caused a draught from most of the windows. In particular I noticed that the draught was more pronounced from the window in the living room and in our bedroom. However, I do not know whether this is because the work was of a lower quality in those windows, or whether the gap between the frame and the building was bigger on those windows. It might also be that we simply noticed the draughts more as we spent the most time in those rooms. I recall that my wife held a candle up against the bottom of the window sill and the flame from the candle flickered in the draught.

"41. In the bedroom, the head of our bed was up against the window. The draught was particularly acute in that room, and in the winter the cold air coming into the flat was intolerable. I recall that I attempted to plug the gap in both the bedroom and in the living room using white silicone, in an attempt to stem the draughts. It did help but it did not completely alleviate the problem. We had to prop cushions and other linen against the bottom of the window frame in the bedroom to make it comfortable to be in there at night, because of the draughts.

"42. I believe that my wife complained to the TMO and to Rydon (the construction company that completed the renovation works). The problems certainly continued, so I can say that the response was not adequate. Shortly before the events of 14 June 2017, we received a 'feedback' card in relation to the refurbishment works. It asked for our thoughts on whether the refurbishment works were successful and asked that we detail any issues we were having. Turufat completed the feedback card and gave it to the TMO. They must have stored these comment cards. My wife told me that on the morning of 30 May 2017, Claire Williams from the TMO and one man from Rydon came to the flat unannounced. They told us that their visit was in response to the concerns that Turufat had raised in the form she had handed back to them. I took them into the bedroom to show them the attempts that had been made to stop the draught coming in. The man from Rydon made a handwritten note of the concerns that we made, and told Turufat and I that he was going to "look into it". He did not say that the issues were a problem, and nor did he say that the problems would be fixed. He did not say that he or anyone would come and fix the windows at some point in the future. No works were done following the meeting and nothing was communicated back to us after the visit, up until the fire occurred some two weeks later."

9. The gaps in the windows were wide. It became so bad that I attempted to fix them myself. First, I tried to use mastick, like putty or clay, to fill the gap between the curved bottom of the window sill and the top of the wall. I then tried to seal the clay in with silicone. This worked to some extent, but there was still some draught but it was reduced, by maybe 50%. It was impossible to cover the whole of the bottom of the windows with the silicone/clay so there was still some remaining draught.
10. Regarding the extractor fan, we did have an extractor fan in the top right panel of the kitchen window. It was manual in operation (ie you needed to turn it on and off), and it did not work particularly well. You could see that it was plasticky and flimsy from its construction and its operation. If there was wind, the fan would turn without power and the wind would come into the kitchen. The kitchen was breezy as a result of the extractor. In colder weather we had to close the kitchen door to ensure that the flat did not get cold from the extractor fan. It was poor the way it worked, and did not remove much if any smoke from the kitchen, so I never used it. Instead, we used to open a kitchen window when the kitchen was smoky or when we were cooking.

Smoke alarms

11. We had three smoke alarms in our flat from my memory. I do not recall hearing them ever go off either when I stayed in or lived in Grenfell Tower. I do not remember testing them, though I recall hearing one beeping (I do not recall which) and subsequently changing the battery. I do not recall whether there was also a mains power backup for those alarms.

Gas works

12. I addressd the issue of gas pipes in paragraph 37 of my Phase 1 witness statement, where I stated as follows:-

"37. I do remember having some concerns about fire safety at Grenfell Tower, even after I had moved in. I remember that I thought it was dangerous putting exposed gas pipes in the emergency stairwell. It looked dangerous to me, and I was always worried that if one of the pipes burst or leaked then we could have a situation where there would be a major fire in the only escape stairwell"

13. I also addressed my concerns in paragraph 38 (quoted above in relation to what I thought was the danger of having gas pipes in the stairwell. I also addressed the gas works in paragraph 39 of my Phase 1 witness statement, where I stated as follows:-

"39. I always used to think that the flat was not finished properly or to a professional standard after the refurbishment works. It always looked to me like it was in a slightly unfinished state, with exposed pipe work everywhere. It did not look that nice, also, in my view. Although the refurbishment happened before I had moved to Grenfell Tower, I do know that my wife really dug her heels in about the position of the new boiler. The contractors and the TMO had wanted the boiler in the hallway, which would have blocked our escape route out of the flat if the boiler caught fire."

14. It just did not seem sensible to me from a common sense perspective to have gas pipes, holding flammable material, in the stairwell that went up the entire building and which was the only means of emergency exit. As quoted above, my wife dealt with this issue with the landlord at length – and we were both concerned about the aesthetics of the gas works, the safety of the pipes, but also the proposed new placement of the boiler in the flat.

Fire safety checks/inspections

15. I was not aware of any fire safety checks whatever taking place at Grenfell Tower.

Fire safety advice

16. In terms of fire safety advice, I do recall a sign on the ground floor by the lifts that communicated that there was 'stay put' policy in the event of a fire. In the first place, I knew that the stay put policy works if you have the appropriate doors and the appropriate means of preventing fires from leaving the flat. My understanding was that the stay put policy was there until you were told otherwise. In my mind, the policy might have been there but I knew that I would rely on my intuition. In the end, that is the reason why we tried to leave. This was the only fire safety advice or communications that I recall receiving, or seeing in Grenfell Tower during my time living there or when I was living elsewhere and visiting my family regularly.

Module 4

Emergency shelter, accommodation and relief centres

17. I addressed the initial relief centres and the Westway Centre in paragraphs 31 – 33 of my Phase 1 statement, where I stated as follows:-

"31. In the days following the fire we did receive help and assistance from volunteers at the Westway Centre and the Portobello Rugby Trust. I found the volunteers and staff at the Portobello Rugby Trust to be very, very helpful and we had no problems getting water, food and clothing from the centres. We had very good support at the Rugby Portobello Trust. In the hours after the fire the Portobello Rugby Trust became an informal information exchange for the residents of the Tower, it was where we went to find out about people or to inform others that people were missing. In the days following the fire the staff of RBKC and the TMO were conspicuous by their total absence. I did not see anyone from the council or the TMO until about four or five days after the fire, when they set up an office at the Westway Centre.

"32. I would say that generally I found the Westway Centre was a bit more official than the Portobello Rugby Trust. Every time I went to the Westway Centre, we had to go through the process of confirming our identities, explain everything multiple times to multiple people, and it was almost like the people there were on the defensive from the moment of their initial contact with residents. We did not feel comfortable there and we were not made to feel very welcome there.

"33. I cannot really praise the efforts of the volunteers highly enough. Everyone was amazing they supported us in any way they could. The council and the TMO were completely unprepared and they ignored us in the immediate days after the fire, when residents needed help the most."

18. We spent the day after the fire was spent searching and meeting people from the Tower. People I bumped into told me that the place to go was Rugby Portobello. The only door open was there. The people there were excellent; it was a place of safety and shelter. It became our means of communication between residents, in addition to the support available there. There was no shortcomings in their support, they were open to help by any means they could. This was the place that we went to the most in the first two weeks after the fire. In the first few days it was the only place we could get support. We had support from our friends and family but they obviously could not provide the level of support we needed or everyone from the Tower needed.

19. In terms of accommodation, as I stated at paragraph 30 of my Phase 1 witness statement we were initially given a room at the Premier Inn near Earl's Court. We were there for a long time, nearly three months. My experience of housing is addressed in paragraphs 34 and 35 of my Phase 1 witness statement:

"34. We ended up staying at the Premier Inn for three months, accommodation which was provided to us by the council. We then moved to the Kensington Hilton and we were permanently re-housed around Easter 2018. We had been living in hotels for nearly a year.

"35. There was a significant and immeasurably disruptive delay to my family being permanently housed. A number of our ex-neighbours from the Tower were moved into [REDACTED], where we live now, or into surrounding buildings. There seemed to be no system for how people were selected for re-housing or when they got re-housed. People whom we know that had moved in to [REDACTED] had experienced serious difficulties with aspects of their new property. The main issues were with the utilities in the building, I understand, and for some this made the building unfit to live in. As a result, we asked the landlord to fix a raft of issues and to ensure that we would not have to move out again, or experience significant disruption as a result of the problems with this property. It took from December 2017 until Easter 2018 for the problems within the building to be sorted."

20. In terms of accommodation, after we went to Westway most of the contact went through Turufat. I do not recall how the conversations started that led to us getting accommodated. I do not recall even where we stayed during the first day; I was like a zombie. I remember that we took our son to our friend across the street, and we left him there with them. From then on we were looking for Isaac the whole day. We were searching for him so we did not think about where we would stay. It was not a priority.

21. The first night I can recall staying in the Premier Inn hotel was two or three days after the fire from my memory. It was a road of Cromwell Road. It was a real dungeon. It was so dark. Now that I think about it, it was shelter but it was not a place I would choose to stay.

Food and drink

22. The accessibility of food and drink in the immediate aftermath of the fire came very much from the community centres and voluntary groups that were offering most of the other services. Once we were placed in the hotel, we were able to access the bed and breakfast facilities – but only bed and breakfast facilities. It was not until a few

weeks after we went into the hotel that through the key worker we could access an allowance for food and drink.

23. The food and drink we could access in the hotel was unhealthy and we were not used to it. It was not ideal for our son at all.

Financial assistance

24. The financial payments we were able to access came from the voluntary groups who had provided all of the other types of support that we had used before. Later on there was access to government funds, but I remember that they were more difficult to access – and it was a while after we had been able to get support from the voluntary centres.

Information and assistance

25. The information and assistance available in terms of the missing and deceased was poor. Most of the day after the fire we spent searching for Isaac, our friend's son who was missing. There was little official information being collected or handed out, and I refer to paragraphs 26, 27, 28 and 30 of my Phase 1 statement, where I stated as follows:-

"26. I kept looking around the Tower, asking various groups of survivors that had come out of the building whether they had seen I[saac].

"27. I also remember calling my friend, Mohamednur Tuccu, who lived in the Tower. The telephone went immediately to voicemail. I learned later that he had died as a result of the fire.

"28. Paulos, his wife [REDACTED], and their other son had gone to the hospital. Paulos's wife [REDACTED], Genete, telephoned me and begged me to find their son. I spent the next few hours searching for him, but I did not find him. When I eventually saw Turufat again, at approximately 6:00 am, and together we went from shelter to shelter, and from centre to centre, trying to find I[saac]. We were unable to find him.

"30. Turufat and I spent the day immediately following the fire searching for I[saac]. We also gave our details to some volunteers and we were given a room initially at the Premier Inn, where we stayed the first night following the fire."

26. Where in paragraph 30 I stated that we gave details to volunteers those volunteers were both in Rugby Portobello but also to some volunteers in the street; people knew us from the Tower, and volunteers would be asking around to see where you were from and whether you need any help. Rugby Portobello had also developed, as part of its role as a place for people from the Tower, a record of the missing and those that had survived.

Coordination, leadership and adequacy of response

27. In relation to these issues, I refer to the paragraphs above (paragraph 31 – 33 of my Phase 1 witness statement). There was nobody from either RBKC or TMO around or available in the days after the fire. The first time I saw them, as I stated in my previous statement, was when TMO set up a desk in the Westway Centre. We had to rely on the work done by volunteers and by charities rather than the local authority, who should have been helping us when we needed it the most. That is a failure in leadership and an inadequate response.

Statement of Truth

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

Signed: 
Abraham Abebe

Dated: 28/02/2020