

Witness Statement of: Zakaria El-Sawy
No. of statement: 2
Exhibits: 0
Date of statement: 5/3/2020

GRENFELL TOWER INQUIRY

WITNESS STATEMENT OF ZAKARIA EL-SAWY

I, **ZAKARIA EL-SAWY**, will say as follows:

1. I am a resident at [REDACTED] Barandon Walk. I am making this statement for the purposes of Phase 2 of the Grenfell Tower Public Inquiry. I made a statement in Phase 1 of the Grenfell Tower Public Inquiry (reference IWS00000427), dated 20th May 2018.
2. This statement address the issues within module 3 (fire safety within the Tower and communication with residents) and module 4 (aftermath) from the Inquiry's stated Phase 2 schedule. This statement does not, and is not intended to set out my experiences on the night of the fire or the impact that these events and the aftermath have had on my family and me. I will refer selectively to certain matters rather than give a full account.
3. My first language is Arabic. I can speak English, but as it is not my first language I produced this statement with help from my daughter who was able to translate for me when necessary.

Living in Barandon Walk

4. I explain about my background in paragraphs 2 to 7 of my Phase 1 statement, but I wish to provide more detail below.
5. I moved into Barandon Walk in 1981. Prior to this, we were living in Linden Gardens. There was a large Egyptian community in the area, and a lot of the community moved to the walkways or Grenfell Tower. I lived in Barandon Walk with my wife and two

daughters, Reham and Rasha. Reham was born in [REDACTED] and Rasha in [REDACTED]. They have since moved out and it has just been my wife, Karema living in Barandon Walk and me. We are still living in Barandon Walk today.

6. The flat has three bedrooms and is on the top floor of the building and I can see Grenfell Tower from my living room balcony. The Tower is less than 100m away from our balcony.
7. I was happy to move to Barandon Walk, although I was not offered any alternative property. Barandon Walk was much bigger than the house in Linden Gardens. I decorated the flat myself. I felt happier once I made the place our own.
8. I had friends who lived in Grenfell Tower, one of them being my dear friend Sukur Elgwahry who passed away. His wife Eslah and daughter Mariem sadly died in the Grenfell Tower fire. My family and the Elgwahry family were close friends for many years.

Module 3

Complaints and communications with the TMO/RBKC

9. We would communicate with RBKC and the TMO when we have an issue with the flat. We would either call up the number we had for the TMO or go to the TMO offices. The TMO offices used to be at the base of Grenfell Tower but these were moved out during the refurbishment. At this point communication got a lot harder.
10. When I would call up the repair line, workmen would rarely turn up as promised. Often we would wait in all day. On some occasions I would be told that the problem was showing as having been resolved even though this was not true. Other times I would be informed that that they had gone to another flat by mistake or that the workers had attended but no one was there to let them in, which again was not true. Occasionally, I would call a private workman to do the work because I became so frustrated with waiting for RBKC and the TMO to complete the much needed repairs.

11. Our kitchen, which had not been changed in the previous thirty years, was in a state of disrepair. There were broken cabinets, crumbling ceiling and a recurring cockroach infestation due to gaps in the walls behind the cabinets. I often complained to the TMO that this needed to be addressed. Whenever I enquired with them I was given a different answer, once even being told that the kitchen had already been changed according to their records. There were no changes to the kitchen – and we would know because we lived there! They always said they would “investigate”. However, we never knew the outcome of these “investigations”. These were major changes that were required, and had I been able to afford it I would have done it myself.
12. Sometimes it felt as if there was no point in contacting RBKC or the TMO. We often became very frustrated and disheartened by the lack of cooperation and it was easier to do things ourselves where possible and where we could afford it.
13. In around 2005 our neighbour’s bathroom was flooded due to ongoing work that was taking place in his flat. I woke up to large amounts of water coming through to my adjoining bedroom, flooding the entire bottom floor of our flat. At the time both my heavily pregnant daughters, their husbands and my one-year-old grandson were living with us. RBKC & the TMO offered very little assistance in response to the damage caused by the flood. They told us that it was a fault of the neighbour who was a leaseholder, and therefore they could not get involved. We were left with waterlogged carpets, which we had to remove ourselves, damp walls and damaged furniture to which no one offered any immediate assistance. The TMO provided a small dehumidifier when pressured further. There was no further follow from the TMO or RBKC, and there were no repercussions for the leaseholder. I was told by RBKC and TMO that I needed to claim against the neighbour for damages, and the neighbour was refusing to take responsibility. The neighbour also stated that his mother worked for the TMO and any complaints from us would be “disregarded”. Several weeks later we complained once more to RBKC and TMO about the lingering damp and exposed floors in our property (bathroom, foyer and master bedroom). They refused to do any repairs apart from removing the exposed cracked tiles because of the asbestos content. This process left me and my family very stressed and so we gave up pursuing the further repairs that were needed as a result of the flood.

14. Since the fire at Grenfell there has sadly been no noticeable change to RBKC's attitude toward housing management. In the period after the fire, we have had numerous problems including a gas leak; two floods; hot water issues and poor water pressure problems.

Evacuation and stay put

15. I never received information about fire safety before moving into the property or during our tenancy. I was never given advice on what to do in the event of a fire by RBKC or TMO.
16. I was not aware there was a stay put policy in place at Barandon Walk. There were no signs on our floor that say this is the policy. Any notices that are in Barandon Walk are in English only. For someone like my wife who cannot read English this was not helpful at all.

Fire alarms

17. We did not have a functioning fire alarm until 2005. We then had three alarms fitted in the flat – one in the kitchen, top floor hallway and bottom floor hallway. It would go off when we were cooking. These have been changed since the fire, and there are now three smoke and heat detectors that are connected to one another. These alarms have been checked about a year after they were installed.
18. There is also no communal fire alarm. In the past, we have had situations where groups of people would set the rubbish chute alight. The TMO were aware of these rubbish chute fires. My wife's bedroom is right above this chute. We would only become aware of the fire when we smelled the smoke. My neighbour and I would then get a bucket of water to put it out. We called the fire brigade about these fires on two occasions. There is a wet riser by the chute and I always assumed this was because there was no way for fire engines were unable to access the to the stair well due to the green preventing access to vehicles. The London Fire Brigade, the TMO and RBKC knew this was a nuisance, but no one reviewed how the chute was used, in order to prevent future fires.

Fire Safety Signage

19. We can only see fire safety signage from leaving the flat when you reach the stairs. This has been added since the fire. There is no sign about what to do in a fire on the top floor.

Other fire safety features in Barandon Walk

20. There are no sprinklers in the building. There was a fire extinguisher in the communal area, but it had a lock on it so residents were unable to use it.
21. The refurbishment affected access to the Tower. Before, we had a massive car park and tennis courts behind the Tower where emergency vehicles could park. After the school was built, they were not able to access the Tower or Walkways from this side.

Doors

22. Our front door has been changed since the fire. We had many concerns during the installation of the door and its fire safety. The sub-contractors encountered issues when trying to attach the heavy door to the new door frame. The frame kept cracking around the hinges. The self-closing mechanism (chain) caused the door to slam shut adding further damage to the door frame. They had difficulty cutting the door to fit the frame, this cause unusual gaps to exist in some places around the door, causing light and draft to enter through the gaps from the outside. My daughter challenged RBKC on these issues and inquired if they would be providing a door fire safety certificate. Her requests were ignored however she was told in a meeting several months later that the doors did not pass the fire safety check and would be replaced in the near future. To date the non-compliant doors have not been replaced.
23. We had no issues with the previous door. It was easy to open and close. It did not slam close behind us.

Module 4

14th June and the following week.

24. In my phase 1 witness statement, at paragraphs 11 to 28, I provide detail of what happened to me on the 14th June 2017. My wife and I were evacuated from our home by the police at around 4:20am. It was utterly terrifying. Words cannot convey how scared and shocked I was. We were told by the police that the Tower had moved and I believed it would collapse and that my wife and I would die. I am not capable of walking fast and I thought I would die. We could see the raging fire and people begging for for help. I was terrified about what would happen to friends, family and those I could see as the fire raced up the building. I was petrified for Eslah and Mariem. I had known Eslah for over 35 years. I could see that there was no hope and that people were dying.
25. We went to our daughter, Rasha's house after we were evacuated. She lives less than 200 metres from Grenfell Tower and Barandon Walk on Bramley Road. We stayed there for approximately 10 days. Rasha's windows looked onto the Tower and the estate. My wife I did not want to leave and go further away because we needed to know what was going on. There was no information and a huge amount of uncertainty.
26. On the day following the fire, I went back to our flat to pick up medication which I urgently needed. I was not allowed into Barandon Walk and this was a huge problem as I must take a lot of different medicines. The police told me that there was a "pop up pharmacy" where we could ask for any vital medication while the flats were inaccessible. It took me some time to find this but when I did, much of the medication my wife and I needed, was not available. I returned to Barandon Walk and desperately explained this to a police officer who agreed to escort me to our flat to retrieve the medication I needed. The police officer would not let me do anything other than collect my own pills he did not allow me the time to search for my wife's medication.
27. When we were evacuated, we did not have a chance to close the windows. Our flat faces the Tower, which is less than 100m away. Large bits of cladding had fallen onto our balcony and everything inside our flat was black with dust and soot. This continued to come into the flat for many weeks.

Relief centres

28. After about a week, I found out that the Westway had facilities to help people. My wife, and I went to the Westway for the first time with our daughter Reham, in the second week after the fire. I remember there were lots of tables and crowds of people but I did not really understand what was going on. It was chaotic and badly set up. We found it too overwhelming and I had to leave. There was no privacy and it was all too stressful for me.
29. I tried to go back on the 11th of July and 19th July 2017. My daughter Reham took us so that we could try to find an official body who could fully explain the situation with rent, service charge and our benefits. I was concerned about how the rent freeze would affect my housing benefit. Despite there being a freeze on service charges, RBKC was still deducting it from my bank account, so I needed to seek further clarification on this matter. Unfortunately, the TMO access desk at Westway did not have answers to our queries relating to the housing benefit and we were told to contact the rent team and DWP.

Emergency accommodation

30. Following the fire we stayed with my daughter Rasha for about ten days. From my daughter's house on Bramley Road, I saw people going into the Walkways. I asked the police who were stationed nearby, they told me that we could return to the flat.
31. We stayed in the flat for a few days but could not live there. The electricity was working in our flat, but there was no hot water and no gas. Both my wife and I have serious health issues which meant that it was vital that we have access to hot water and gas. We could not live in the flat without hot water. We had no choice but to approach Robyn Fairman of RBKC to ask for assistance.
32. After several days it became apparent that the situation with the hot water was not going to be resolved. During this period my wife and I were forced to attend Kensington Leisure Centre or our family's homes in order to shower. This was particularly difficult for us given our old age and health issues so my daughter Reham contacted RBKC to ask for a hotel placement. They informed her that the only availability was in Richmond

and that the stay would be initially limited to 2 weeks. We could not even consider moving so far away. It was essential to us that we received the support of our family and had access to the local services that we rely on such as the GP and St Charles Hospital. The fire had been an incredibly traumatic experience for us and it was also very important that we remained in the community as we were beginning to come to terms with what had happened.

33. My daughter contacted Rachel Dalton of RBKC's housing department, having been provided with her contact details by another resident in the Walks. Reham explained the situation and Rachel Dalton did arrange for us to move to a hotel in Shepherds Bush. Our booking was originally made for two weeks, on the basis that engineers would attend our flat and ensure that we had access to hot water in that time period. Unfortunately the hot water supply was not resolved until several months later.
34. On the 5th July 2017, we were placed in the K West Hotel. We were not able to return to our flat in Barandon Walk until 19th April 2018.
35. Being in a hotel was not restful and added to stress. Having to stay in a small space aggravated my claustrophobia and increased my stress levels. It was a 10-15 minute walk from the entrance of the hotel to the room. Because of my health issues this discouraged me from wanting to leave the room and get some fresh air. My wife was also affected by the long walk due to her medical conditions. We did not have the facilities to cook for ourselves.
36. A hotel is not a comfortable home. Being in the hotel for such a long time negatively affected both my and my wife's mental and physical health. It was difficult being physically removed from the community, particularly at a time of mourning when we were despairing of the loss of friends. I do not want to provide details in this statement of the psychological effects of being in a hotel, except to say living in a hotel and being unsure how long we were staying for was extremely difficult.

Key worker

37. We were allocated a key worker around the 15th of July, although we did not find this key worker to be very efficient. Our daughter Reham ended up effectively acting as our key worker and getting things done for us. This was an additional pressure Reham

should not have had to be put through. Reham would often have to act as an interpreter for my wife and I as well, as they were often not provided. Reham had to follow up on every issue that we encountered post Grenfell Tower fire tragedy while caring for her own children and holding down a full-time job. Reham was offered no support, but was the one who was supporting us. It was a horrific time for the whole family.

38. The key worker would visit us at the hotel. They were not flexible with their meeting times which meant that it was not always easy to arrange a visit that did not clash with my hospital appointments. As a result, my wife and daughter Reham had more encounters with her than I did.
39. The key worker was very slow to arrange support. She did not take into account our requirement for Halal food and stated that “we had to accept what was available as RBKC were being very generous”. I did not want to be in a hotel and did not want this support but was unable to go home and had been forced out. It felt humiliating to be told this.
40. It did not seem to us that the key worker took account of our age, medical conditions and financial situation as we are dependent on state pension. Reham had to explain our medical needs, but even then our key worker did not seem to understand our needs and was not proactive in offering us the support that we required. There were certain replacement items my wife and I needed in the hotel for our medical needs, and Reham had to be in constant communication to get these. For example, my wife needed an orthopaedic pillow but it was a struggle to get this. Often our key worker would be unreachable for days and my daughter Reham would have to then contact Rachel Dalton at RBKC to get issues resolved. In total we had four key workers. It was difficult to have to re-explain our experience and start over again with each person.

Information and assistance from voluntary groups and the council

41. In the days after the fire, there was a lack of information from anyone in a position of authority. We did not see anyone. Reham was attending meetings organised by the Lancaster West Residents Association and reporting whatever information she was

receiving back to us. She was finding out about meetings through word of mouth. The meetings were held at the Latymer Christian Centre, St Clement's Church, Almanaar Mosque or the Methodist Church.

42. Official communications would always be in English. We had to ask constantly for Reham to translate the letters into Arabic for us. Reham along with many other residents constantly complained to Gold command and RBKC about the availability of material in different languages as this affected the resident's access to vital information. Eventually this began happening but it took at least three months for RBKC to reach this stage.

Returning to Barandon Walk

43. We were not able to return to Barandon walk until the 19th April 2018 when our hot water was finally re-instated. We were out of our home for nine and half months. It was a dreadful period and exacerbated my health problems.
44. We have now returned home, but we are still concerned about the possibility of damaging chemicals and pollution in the area. We are also concerned about the future of the temporary boiler and whether we will ever have a permanent solution to this problem. The temporary boiler has on several occasions over-heated or required topping up with fuel which affects our access to hot water without prior notice.

Conclusion

45. My overwhelming feeling is that the response to the Grenfell tragedy lacked continuity, responsibility and above all accountability from our landlords, RBKC, TMO and other relevant authorities. Information was very slow and inconsistent and services would be available one day and not the next. We would also have to keep explaining ourselves to the people allocated to assist us as they came and went. This unlike before made us feel like we didn't matter and didn't deserve to be treated with dignity. This has caused my physical and mental health to decline significantly at a time when I needed recovery and a space to mourn the loss of those that have passed away in the tragedy. I will never forget the actions of those responsible and will not forgive them for this.

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:

5/3/2020

Zakaria El-Sawy