

Witness Statement of: Karema El-Sawy

No. of statement: 2

Exhibits: 0

Date of statement: 5/3/2020

GRENFELL TOWER INQUIRY

WITNESS STATEMENT OF KAREMA EL-SAWY

I, **KAREMA 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.
2. I made a statement in Phase 1 of the Grenfell Tower Public Inquiry (reference IWS00000424), dated 20th May 2018.
3. 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.
4. My first language is Arabic. I can speak a little English. I produced this statement with help from my daughter, Reham who was able to translate for me.

Background and Living in Barandon Walk

5. I explained about my family's background in paragraphs 2 to 6 of my Phase 1 Statement. My husband, Zakaria, and I moved into Barandon Walk in 1982 and lived there with my family. We have two daughters, Reham and Rasha. Over the years,

Reham and Rasha have moved out. On the 14th June 2017, my husband and I were living in Barandon Walk. We were both retired at the time. We rent our flat from RBKC. Both my husband and I have health issues and related mobility problems.

6. Our flat is on the top floor of Barandon Walk. We can see Grenfell Tower from our living room window. We are very close to the Tower.
7. My husband and I do not speak fluent English and rely on our daughters to assist us with translating documents and interpreting for us.
8. I knew a lot of people who lived in Grenfell Tower. I was particularly close to Eslah Elgwahry who lived in the Tower, with her daughter, Mariem. I first met Eslah when we moved into Barandon Walk and our children grew up together. We became particularly close when Eslah's husband passed away. We were like family for a very long time. The Egyptian community on the estate was very close and we often relied on each other.

Module 3

Fire Safety in Barandon Walk

9. Within paragraphs 8 to 11 of my Phase 1 statement, I noted fire safety measures in Grenfell Tower. I wish to highlight how we only had a functioning fire alarm from 2005 that was never checked. I also mentioned how there were reoccurring rubbish chute fires at Barandon Walk, however we never received fire safety leaflets.
10. RBKC and the TMO never provided us with information about fire safety before the Grenfell Tower Fire.

Grenfell Tower

11. I often went to Grenfell Tower to visit Eslah and my other Egyptian friends. Frequently the lifts would be out of service and the only option was to climb the stairs. Often this would be difficult for me because Eslah lived on one of the top floors in the Tower.

When this happened we would arrange to meet on the 11th floor where one of our mutual friends lived so that the climb would not be so difficult.

Other Module 3 Issues

12. I understand my husband, Zakaria El-Sawy, has provided a statement to the Inquiry providing further information about module 3 issues, including fire safety in Barandon Walk and communication with residents. I do not wish to provide further detail in this statement.

Module 4

14th June 2017 and the following week

13. In my phase 1 witness statement I detail what happened to me on the 14th June at paragraphs 12 to 34. Seeing the Tower on fire was terrible. I watched in despair and was worried that people would not survive, including Eslah and Mariem. I was worried that Grenfell Tower would fall onto our building and our flat would catch fire.
14. We were evacuated just after 4am. I was terrified that the building would collapse and we would die. I detail our evacuation at paragraphs 27 to 28 of my phase one statement. The police suddenly banged on our door and were yelling for us to get out. I left the flat in my nightdress with nothing else. We were in such a state of panic.
15. Both my husband and I take regular medication for our health problems and I need these tablets to assist my mobility and to ease my constant pain. When we left the flat in a panic, we did not take any of our medication with us. We stood outside on the green in between Testerton and Barandon Walk for about 15 minutes. We could barely believe what we were seeing. It was so overwhelming that we would look at the tower before turning away, taking a few steps and finding it impossible not to look back. We asked police officers if we could go back into our flat to get our medication but they told us that we could not because it was not safe to do so.

16. We were fortunate that our daughter, Rasha, lives close by and so were able to take refuge at her flat on Bramley Road. Rasha's window looked out towards Grenfell Tower – about 190m away, where you can clearly see the middle to the top of the Tower. My husband and I sat at the window of my daughter's property and watched in horror the events of the night unfold before our eyes. It was terrible and we did not want to watch but we could not help it. All I could think about was Eslah and Mariem and began to pray for their safety over and over again. We were gripped by fear as the Tower burned and emergency services struggled to gain access to the area. I was so scared for all of the people I knew who lived in the building, and those that we did not know. Rescue efforts appeared helpless and hopeless.
17. I was so deeply worried about Eslah and Mariem. Shortly after 5am on the morning following the fire I felt an urgent need to take my daughter and go searching for Eslah and Mariem as well as I was becoming very anxious about my home. I saw Ahmed Elgwahry and Mohamed Rasoul on Whitchurch Road. Ahmed appeared red faced and distraught, at first I was happy to see him because I was sure that I would hear good news of Mariem and Eslah being rescued. Ahmed began to cry and said "I just know they're gone". I couldn't process this, nor could my daughter. I still believed that they could be found unconscious and that they were lying in some hospital somewhere. I tried to urge my daughter saying that we needed to all go looking in the hospitals and rescue centres. I was in denial and shock that they were all gone. I began to cry and felt disorientated. My daughter asked Mohamed Rasoul if his entire family made it out of the tower. He confirmed that they were all out. I asked once more "what about Eslah and Mariem?" to which Ahmed said "I know they've gone". I felt faint and my daughter Rasha ushered me aside to lean against the wall. I was about to collapse. My daughter then urged me to return to her flat with the promise that she would go online to find out information about the missing and local rescue centres.
18. I returned to my daughter's flat and was back and forth between the following news on TV and looking out the window. Because of my language barrier it felt 10 times harder for me to process information, I was visually taking in what was happening without the understanding of the information. All I would say out loud was "Oh my dear Eslah".

19. I left our flat with nothing, not even a tooth brush. My daughter Rasha and her husband offered to go buy us some. Unfortunately, all the local shops had either donated or were sold out of all their stock of toothbrushes, including Ladbroke Grove Sainsbury's. Eventually they were able to get some from Queensway. At no point was I, my husband or daughter aware of any location in the local area that was supplying toothbrushes to the evacuated residents.
20. I also went out onto the patio in my daughters flat which looks onto the Latimer Road tube station platform. I saw debris falling onto her patio despite the distance from the tower. This only deepened my anxiety when considering how close my own flat was to the tower. We noticed my daughter's patio, living room and bedrooms were also being affected by the smoke.
21. I recall sending my daughter Rasha to the Freston road Harrow club to enquire about the missing in hope that I would receive news that Eslah and Mariem were rescued.

Emergency Accommodation

22. In the days following the fire, we were not provided with any information on where to go and whether it was safe to return to our home. We stayed with Rasha for approximately ten days after the fire. During this time, we received no information from RBKC or the TMO and no one in an official position got in contact with us.
23. I take ten different medications daily to ease my pain and to allow me to sleep at night. In the two to three days following the fire, I was unable to sleep. I did not have my medication and the frightening events I witnessed from my daughter's window made me feel as though I was paralysed.
24. Whilst I stayed at my daughter's flat, in pain and in shock at the events I had witnessed, my husband went to look for a temporary pharmacy that we had heard was providing essential medicines to people who had been evacuated. Whilst walking around in search of the pop-up pharmacy he learned from an NHS volunteer that they would not be able to supply several items that are prescribed to me and so I went without medication for some time until my daughter Reham was able to get the GP to repeat the prescription for that same month.

Return to Barandon Walk

25. Approximately ten days after the fire we returned to our flat in Barandon Walk. At this time we still did not have any information about whether the Walkway was actually safe. This lack of information about safety added to the anxiety I was feeling.
26. Our flat was filthy when we first returned. We had not had a chance to close our windows when we were evacuated in a rush on the night. The flat was extremely dirty and everything was covered in a layer of black dust and debris. On the balcony, there were pieces of metal and cladding that must have come from Grenfell Tower. It would blow into the flat for weeks and weeks.
27. Initially we weren't offered any practical help with cleaning by RBKC. We were provided with very little information about this and were not sure how to apply for this or if we had to be on a waiting list.
28. After we returned to our flat and before we moved to a hotel, I remember hearing an alarm going off in the Tower, which really panicked me. My neighbours came to knock on our door telling my husband and I to get out. We evacuated and went straight to Rasha's flat. I did not know what was going to happen to us, whether we were safe or what was happening. I felt confused. I later found out that the alarm sounded when there was an issue with Grenfell Tower moving. We also evacuated when alarms in other flats in Testerton Walkway went off; we left and went straight to Rasha's. Due to our health conditions, we were not able to physically stand around and wait until someone told us it was safe to return. My daughter, Reham, would usually find out if it was safe and come to tell us that we could go back. It was incredibly unsettling and a stressful time for my family.
29. There was no hot water in the flat when we went back. We wanted to stay there, it was our home, but given the lack of hot water it was just not suitable. Reham had heard that other people were being placed in hotels and she managed to contact the necessary people to arrange a hotel placement for us.

Hotel Accommodation

30. We moved into a hotel on the 5th July 2017. This was the K West Hotel by Shepherd's Bush. They initially wanted to place us in Richmond but we refused as it was too far away from our family. Reham knew other residents were staying in the K West and pleaded for us to be placed there.
31. Our hotel booking was initially renewed on a weekly basis which caused a lot of uncertainty. On several occasions, we were not told that our stay had expired and when we went back to our room, our key card to access our room would not work. We would have to contact Reham, who would contact RBKC to ask them to send through the confirmation of extending our hotel stay to the hotel management. Whilst we waited for Reham to get us a new key card and confirmation that we could stay, we had to sit in the busy reception area. It was exhausting and humiliating, and could have been avoided had there been better communication from RBKC to the hotel.

Suitability of the hotel

32. Staying for so long in a hotel was very difficult particularly at a time when I was struggling to come to terms with what had happened during the fire.. I needed my own space but had to spend most of my time in the hotel room, there was no safe space to be alone with my grief. In our room the windows did not let in direct sunlight as the narrow space between us and the building directly opposite blocked it. We also struggled with the temperature of the room and the air conditioning unit. The room would become very hot, and we were not able to let in sufficient fresh air to cool it down. I used the air conditioning unit to keep it cool, however this affected my husband's rheumatism. It was stressful because he struggled to feel comfortable in this atmosphere.
33. Whilst we were thankful to be in the hotel and have access to hot water, we found it difficult to live comfortably or actually settle. At times it felt claustrophobic and confining. It was a depressing time. We were worried that if we asked to be moved to

a larger room or request an additional room, we would be moved to another hotel far away from the area.

34. The experience of living in a hotel was exhausting. We were constantly pushing Reham to find out whether the problems with our flat were being dealt with and whether it was yet suitable for us to return to. In April 2018 we finally received assurances from RBKC that the issues with the water and gas and heating had been resolved and we were able to go home.

Support and information from Royal Borough of Kensington and Chelsea

35. All of the support offered by RBKC appeared to be discretionary and inconsistent. There was no standard followed by RBKC that meant that those affected received the same information, assistance and financial support.
36. We were allocated a number of different key workers following the fire. Unfortunately, none of the key workers were very helpful and often seemed out of their depth.
37. The main keyworker did visit us at the hotel and could see how difficult things were for us. Despite this she seemed very limited in the help that she could actually offer. She was frequently difficult to contact and had little authority to make decisions or provide advice.
38. My daughter Reham was often required to assist in areas that the key worker was unable to help with. Unfortunately, this was in almost all situations that arose. Without Reham, we would not have been able to communicate with RBKC and receive information about help available to us.

Medical Conditions

39. Since Grenfell, my health has deteriorated. I do not want to go into detail here but the effect on my physical and mental health has been significant.

40. My husband and I have different GPs and we have found that their response was varied. My husband's GP investigated specific symptoms that may have resulted from exposure to the effects of the fire. My GP did not.

Access to Information

41. Both my husband and I speak Arabic as our first language and have difficulty communicating in English. We had to rely on our daughter to interpret for us and get us the information we needed. We did not want to rely on Reham fully because we knew she was mourning too as well as looking after her children and working full-time, this almost pushed her to breaking-point. However, we had no choice as there would be no interpreters at meetings and at first all written communication was in English only. Reham asked for letters to be translated all the time, but this did not happen until much later.

Adequacy of response & lessons learned

42. The glaring failure of RBKC to secure the lives of our friends in the tower makes me very angry. As a child I was witness to war, but experiencing the tragedy of the fire at Grenfell Tower has left a deeper scar imprinted in my mind that I cannot ever forget or overcome. It is also unacceptable that the response in the immediate aftermath of the fire was wholly inadequate. It made me feel that we are not regarded as worthy of basic treatment from the Council or government.
43. I don't feel like any lessons have been learned from the sad events of the tragedy. This was reflected clearly in our treatment by RBKC in the aftermath and to this date. I am still unaware of RBKC's contingency and evacuation plan should there be a fire in Barandon Walk. Any assurances from RBKC will do little to repair the trust that has been broken and will continue to be so until they are held to account.

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

Karema El-Sawy