

Witness statement of: Amina Yabajadda
Number of statements: 1
Exhibits: 0
Date of statement: 28/06/18

GRENFELL TOWER PUBLIC INQUIRY

WITNESS STATEMENT OF AMINA YABAJADDA

I, AMINA YABAJADDA, will say as follows:-

1. This statement is my account of events that took place on Tuesday 13 June 2017 into the early hours of Wednesday 14 June 2017, which I make for the purposes of Phase 1 of the Grenfell Tower Public Inquiry. I would wish to make a further statement to address issues falling to be dealt with in Phase 2 of the Inquiry.

Background

2. My date of birth is [REDACTED]. I have lived in in flat [REDACTED], Hurstway Walk since 2000. You can see the West façade of the Tower from the balcony of my flat. I live with my son, Omar Gomari who is [REDACTED].
3. I was not working before the fire as I had to give up my job to concentrate on studying English. My speaking is good but I wanted to develop my writing. Arabic is my first language and I learnt a little bit of French back home.

Amina Yabajadda

Community

4. Prior to the fire, there was a strong, very closely-tied community. There were a lot of Moroccan people living in Grenfell Tower and in the walkways, some originally coming from the same town in Morocco. We are all more like family and I call most of the wives my sisters. Residents I didn't know to socialise with, I would know to say hello to.
5. Faouzia El-Wahabi, Elsay Elgawahry and Khadija Khalloufi were my best friends. They all lived in Grenfell Tower. We would go to weddings, celebrations, for days out to Portobello Market and pop round to each other's houses. We would celebrate Eid together and got to Mosque to pray together. We would meet in the park, bring coffee and picnics and let the children play together. The children also went to evening Arabic school so they all grew up together. Omar was especially close to the El-Wahabi family and with Mariem Elgawahry.
6. Faouzia El-Wahabi was one of a kind. She was never upset. Whatever problems she had, it never showed. She drew the positives from life and was always upbeat and smiling. At weddings, she would be the first one up dancing and made any celebration a real party.
7. When Omar left school, he started working at the [REDACTED] near to Grenfell Tower. All the children in the community would go and see him. It was lovely to see they had their own little community; they were like siblings. I saw Omar's confidence grow.

14 June 2017

8. It was Ramadan so I was sending and receiving text messages from my friends about what food we would be cooking that night. There was lots of food circulating the community from samosas to Moroccan cakes and sweets. It was a happy time.

9. Since the trauma of the night, I have forgotten parts of what happened or who I was with. This is my recollection of events as best as I can remember.
10. I was at home in the evening and I think at around 9:20pm my son got home and decided to rest. At around 11pm, I left the flat and went, like I did every day, to Mosque to pray. I drove to the Mosque with two of my friends, Saida and I think Selma. We arrived home around midnight. I was looking for parking for half an hour before eventually finding a space on the corner of Testerton Road where it meets Whitchurch Road.
11. I did not see or hear anything unusual. I headed back home, took off my abaya and decided to rest on the sofa in the living room. Omar was still resting in his bedroom. I wanted to stay awake so I could make sure that he was awake [REDACTED]
[REDACTED]
12. At around 1:10am to 1:15am my mobile rang. I did not answer it. It rang again so I picked it up and it was my friend, Nadia Elbouti who lives downstairs. Nadia sounded panicked. She was saying "There's a fire". My first thought was that she meant in our block and I instinctively jumped from the sofa. She explained that it was in the Tower. I have seen fires before in Grenfell Tower and I knew these fires were always contained so I tried to reassure her and told her that the fire brigade would sort it. I told her it would all be fine but she was insisting on going there to help. Her daughter was unwell that evening so I asked her not to scare her, to relax and let the firemen take control of it, which they definitely would. I stayed on the sofa and tried to relax again.
13. Nadia's daughter's best friend lived in the Tower and I think her daughter's friend had called. Nadia could see the fire from her window and she was getting updates through her daughter. Nadia called me again crying. I just kept trying to reassure her. She was saying that we needed to go to the Tower and help because the fire was getting bigger.
14. My house phone and my other mobile phone began ringing whilst I was on the phone to Nadia. I answered my house phone and it was Selma. She said that we need to go down to the Tower. My television was on but suddenly, I could hear lots of sirens. I

started to wonder what was going on. I switched the television off and I could hear people screaming “help” in Arabic. I went out to my balcony and saw the Tower on fire. It was like something out of a movie. I couldn’t see where exactly the fire was; I could just see red everywhere. I saw people hanging from their windows in the Tower waving white flags made of sheets or clothing. Others were flashing lights with their phones to hail attention. I could not hear any fire alarms and only noticed windows open where residents were crying for help. I had never seen anything on this scale and knew at that point the fire was serious and out of control. I panicked and ran to wake Omar. I told him that we needed to get out. We had planned to go back to the [REDACTED] later that evening so he was half asleep but dressed. I grabbed my abaya and we ran out of the flat and downstairs.

15. When we arrived downstairs, police officers were in the hallway and corridors telling everyone to get out. I remember one policeman in particular screaming “Get Out! Get Out.” He seemed panicked, which fueled our panic. We both left the block by the exit next to the bus stop. I saw a lot of people I know but I cannot now remember exact faces. When we got out of the block, I looked up in horror and saw the fire. The whole Tower was engulfed in red flames. I heard people in all languages screaming for help and my heart broke; I prayed for something to do to help but I knew that there was nothing. They were in God’s hands. There were helicopters hovering in the sky but they didn’t seem to be doing anything.
16. . I asked a police officer why the helicopters weren’t putting water on the Tower to dampen the flames but he said it was the media, not the emergency services. Everyone was furious about this.
17. We stayed by the bus stop so Omar could sit down but we could see everything that was happening. The fire was circulating the Tower and I was watching in shock. In only about five or ten minutes, the flames had wrapped themselves around the building.
18. One lady who was stood next to us told me that earlier on in the night she was closer to the Tower but the police had moved her back. She said she saw someone throwing a baby out and being caught by someone on the ground. There was so many people

talking of the horrors they had seen but I couldn't focus on them. I was trying to calm Omar down.

19. Where we were sat seemed to be a through-path for those coming out of the Tower. Every time someone passed, there was a strong smell of burning plastic that surrounded them. I have never smelt anything like it before. It was awful and it made me vomit.

20. The sights were so distressing. Big pieces of what looked like plastic were falling from the Tower and landing everywhere. Firefighters came past completely covered in black smoke and unable to breathe. They sat and lay near us and the smell was unbearable. They were all given something in a glass bottle, which I assumed was water.

21. I tried to turn my back away from the Tower and firefighters but the flames were reflecting on the windows of the houses opposite. I tried to stay looking down but it just seemed everywhere I looked was red. Up until this point I had a little hope that the fire would be brought under control but now I knew it was too late. I started to really panic and fear for our lives. I decided to move further away. I took Omar to the end of Bramley Road where it meets Whitchurch Road. Both of us were crying.

22. I was trying to stay calm for Omar but inside I was panicked and shocked. I was trying to think of how I could get Omar a change of clothes but my head was not working. I was so confused as to what and how this was happening. I did not know what to do.

23. I remember drinking as much water as I could [REDACTED], which made me need the toilet. I asked a policeman if there was somewhere I could go. He was not helpful and I got upset. [REDACTED]
[REDACTED] I just sobbed; I was helpless.

24. We stayed on Bramley Road just praying and begging God to put the fire down.

25. Our neighbour's daughter works at Harrow Youth Club. She opened the club and provided shelter and water for residents. Omar and I arrived there at around 4:30am or maybe 5am. They had a leather sofa inside and Omar sat down. I left him to speak with other residents.
26. The youth club was full of residents from the Tower and those from the walkways. Everyone was upset and crying. No one seemed to take notice of anyone or anything specifically; we were just praying to God for families and friends to be safe.
27. Khadija Khalloufi's husband arrived at the youth club. I noticed he was in a dressing gown, pyjamas and slippers but there was blood all over his bottoms and he smelled of burning plastic. He was hysterical. I asked where Khadija was and he told me that he lost her as they were going down the stairs. He said he couldn't see anything and was calling for her but there was no answer. He said a firefighter then dragged him out. I prayed to God that another firefighter had saved her but deep down in my heart I knew she was gone. The paramedics were trying to clean the wounds on his legs but he wouldn't let anyone touch him. He just kept screaming to look for his wife.
28. I also remember seeing Hamid Wahabi who was in an ambulance. He just said 'thank God I am still alive'.
29. The fire was still ablaze. I remember being in utter disbelief that it was still not under control. I could not stop crying. Outside, I couldn't see anything but smoke and red flames. Inside the youth club there were lots of televisions on and the fire was being reported. I did not want to see or hear anything more; I couldn't cope. It was all so overwhelming. I lay on the sofa next to Omar and prayed.
30. Around 7:30 to 8am the youth club closed and the rugby club opened. When we arrived, I saw lots of my friends. I found Nadia who explained that she had taken shelter in St. Clement's Church. There were some residents who had escaped the Tower and some from the walkways. By this point, most of us knew at least one person who had not made it out of the Tower.

31. I cannot recall making contact with anyone. However, having since looked through my phone records, I tried to call Aziza Rahani throughout the night but I have no clear recollection of when this was. She lived on the twelfth floor of the Tower and I remember asking others at the rugby club if she had escaped. Her daughter and my son grew up together. I was reassured that she got out, which made me feel better.
32. I saw Abdulaziz El-Wahabi's brother, who lives in the walkway. He told me that his sister had called him told him that the police had told them to stay in the flat because they were coming to save them. However, she had managed to get out of the Tower safely with her children and husband.
33. News continued to filter in about other families. I heard that some had died in the fire and others had escaped but were in hospital and I heard some people were in comas. Every time the police came into the Rugby Club everyone became frantic for news. I kept trying to reassure Khadija's husband that she was in a hospital and we would get the call soon but he was in such a state that I couldn't really talk to him.
34. One of the Muslim charities and other residents had brought food and clothes for those who needed them. It was a warm, sunny morning. I felt dirty not being able to shower but was relieved to finally get out of soiled clothes. Omar was still shaking, crying and vomiting but I managed to get him to change. Neither Omar nor I ate or drank [REDACTED] and, in hindsight, I think we were all in a state of shock. I was not able to control what I was doing or think about things clearly. I had no idea really what was going on.

Aftermath

35. We stayed at the Rugby Club all day and night. The police presence was unnerving. Lots of our [REDACTED] friends visited us to make sure that we were ok but there was no life in anyone. We could see the Tower from the Rugby Club and it was a constant visual reminder of what had happened. Only a day before the building looked pretty and was white. Now it was charred black and the whole area was filled with smoke. There were bits of debris strewn everywhere. I couldn't bear to look outside.

36. A local butcher brought lots of chicken to the Rugby Club for when we broke from fasting. Around the same sort of time, residents from the Tower were starting to be given hotels. Walkway residents were not considered a priority so Omar and I stayed. The Muslim charity continued to bring food and the Red Cross brought us quilts. We were still so traumatised and Omar was still shaking. We were too scared to go out and did not go to [REDACTED] that night.
37. By the third day, I was still not able to return home and, even though I was homeless, the council kept telling me that I was not a priority for housing. I was so upset and wanted so badly to shower. We were later told that the tennis courts at the Westway had been set up for shelter and that we should head there.
38. I have no concept of time but I remember feeling very weak. I was unable to walk and some fellow Muslims offered to take me in their car. Unfortunately, we couldn't get too close because all the roads were blocked off.
39. When we arrived at the tennis courts, the whole area had been laid with mattresses and airbed with quilts and blankets and it was packed with residents.
40. I tried to rest but it was so hard. There was one lady from Afghanistan who I knew by face. She and her children survived the fire but she had lost her husband. I tried to communicate my condolences but she doesn't speak very good English. She kept drifting off to sleep but waking up screaming. It was making us all more distressed. In the end, she was given a bed in the corner of the tennis court.
41. Everyone had been separated and some people were still unaccounted for. There was no phone reception inside the tennis courts and I wanted to stay outside and wait by the phone but it was too traumatic. I would just try and get updates when I went out to the communal area where food was served.
42. I was told by my neighbours that we were allowed to go back to our flat and collect some personal belongings. I went back and gathered some bits. Later that day one of the councilors came around. He asked if I wanted to stay at a hotel. I said yes; I couldn't live like that any longer.

43. I was placed in a hotel in West London. The first thing I did was shower. This was the first shower I was able to have since the night of the fire. Omar and I then went straight to sleep.
44. The following morning we woke up at 8am and didn't eat. We were still so disorientated. We went back to Westway and met up with residents. We stayed there all day trying to offer comfort to our friends. We also went to [REDACTED] for the first time since the fire.
45. The area looked like a bomb had hit it. There were huge pieces of black debris in the streets surrounding the Tower, outside the Methodist Church and all along Bramley Road. It was on the roofs of buildings and bus shelters too.
46. For some time, we continued to return to the Westway to help and then sleep at the hotel. One evening we arrived at night time and there were police officers sat in chairs outside. Some residents were so rude to them. I felt shame and covered my face. The weather had turned and I felt sorry for them sat outside in the cold. It was not just us suffering; everyone around us was suffering too.

Returning home

47. After around 12 days, the council told us that it wasn't advisable to go home. They were still investigating whether the Tower was stable. They told us that if we went home, it was our responsibility. However, I was becoming so sick of living in a hotel and it was really stressful for me. I missed my flat, wearing my own clothes and so decided to go home.
48. When I returned, the house smelled of damp and smoke. The gas and electricity had been cut off so we had no heating, hot water or phone lines; nothing was working. The first thing I did was get the bleach and clean everywhere. I stayed at home but would go to the Westway to shower and eat.

49. After a couple of weeks the weather changed and it became colder and wetter. Omar was sleeping with two quilts but he was still shivering. Reluctantly, we had to return to the Westway.
50. When we got there, one of the other residents said that the council were giving out heaters so I contacted them and asked for one for my room and one for Omar's room. The lady I spoke with asked me why I needed heaters for the rooms. I told her because I wanted to return home but it was cold. She asked me if I was crazy and offered me a hotel to stay in. She was very patient and helpful.
51. I was housed in another hotel in West London, which was where Selma was also staying. We stayed there for three weeks.
52. The media coverage had now become international and so my mother, in Morocco was calling me, crying. She knew I was ok but wanted to see my face. I couldn't speak to her for very long or visit because I was so upset. Over the summer, I became very distant and reclusive. I ended up losing five kilograms because of the stress.
53. By August, I still was not feeling any better. I decided to visit my mum so Omar and I left in August and stayed with her for one month.
54. When we got home, we were allowed in our flat. I stayed for two weeks before being put into a hotel again. There were so many issues with the gas and water. A temporary boiler was built to service the flats but the pressure was not being right and only the first floor got water. It took a couple of months to resolve but, even now, we still have problems.
55. Prior to the fire, I grew fruit, vegetables and seasonings on my balcony. I had all sorts from coriander to tomatoes and parsley. When I got back, everything had died.
56. Around three or four weeks after returning home, everyone was still so nervous. I remember one day something happened at the bottom of the Tower. I overheard people shouting and lots of heavy footsteps. I looked out of the window and saw people running away from the Tower. They were screaming "Run! It's moving". I saw

lots of workmen and police following so I grabbed Omar and ran with them. It turned out that they thought the Tower was about to collapse. We all lived in fear.

57. As a result of the heating issues, my flat has had to be refurbished. My bathroom was black with damp so the council sent painters and decorators. It took them two weeks to finish the work and it was such an upheaval. They have now started on my kitchen. The works were supposed to be complete last Friday but there was a delay with some of the parts. When they told me they would be back next week I burst into tears. I was crying all day. It just feels like a constant waiting game full of stress and delays.

Health issues

58. Omar lost a lot of friends. His best friend died in the Tower and Omar had to attend his funeral, a thing a child should never have to do.
59. Immediately following the fire, my eye wouldn't close. I went to my GP and he said it should resolve within a week. It took longer than a week to get better and I have been left with a constant twitch. For a while I was scared thinking I was going to lose my sight.
60. When we were placed at the hotel, I saw a counsellor. I spent the sessions crying and not really talking. The sessions lasted for a couple of weeks but I was still very emotional. A few weeks later, I visited my GP because my throat was sore. Every time I cried it felt like I had a throat infection. He referred me to "Time to Talk" to address the cause of me crying rather than my throat. I receive occasional support from my GP and plan to take up counselling in the future but at the moment, I still don't feel ready.
61. I struggle with sleeping; sometimes I wake up for no reason and other times I wake up in fear having heard a siren. I am also suffering from [REDACTED] and constantly [REDACTED] I cannot go into high rise buildings for fear of being trapped in it in a fire. This is especially sad because I used to visit my cousin every Saturday. She lives on the [REDACTED] She is the eldest

cousin so every weekend she would host. The whole family would go and spend the day there. We would arrive around 12 noon and stay for dinner. We would also go to hers for special celebrations like Eid. On 14 July 2017, we had planned to go to hers for Eid but I couldn't go by myself. I had to call my friend, Selma and ask her to come with me. I got there and sat on the sofa; I couldn't move or relax. I was petrified that something bad would happen. My family were drinking tea and coffee, eating lots of Moroccan food and celebrating but I couldn't celebrate or eat anything. I was unable to focus on anything but leaving and couldn't even hold a conversation. I left and then had to make excuses every weekend as to why I was not able to go. Around November or December 2017, my cousin went to Mecca and we were all going over to hers to congratulate her. I wanted to try again because it was an important function for the family. I hoped that before it was too soon after the fire and that now, I would be ok. However, I was unable to relax and stayed there for maybe half an hour or so before the panic really set in and I had to leave. It's a shame that I am no longer able to see them every Saturday. I really miss our time together.

62. Since the fire, I am also suffering from a lot of forgetfulness. I quite often put things down and have no idea where they are. My mind is so preoccupied with the aftermath of the fire and Omar's wellbeing.

63. [REDACTED] and we cannot stop it but it is very hard when the newsletters and media constantly report that this was an avoidable tragedy. Most of my friends are still in hotels and do not want to come back. I understand why because when I look at Omar, he's lost his happiness. All the children around here are the same. All the adults are just living. Things are not the same. We do not enjoy life and there is a still lot of crying amongst the community.

64. Before, our community was brought together with love and now it has been brought together by sadness. Every day we wake up, eat, sleep and go through the motions. No one is excited for summer like previous years and there is no planning for next week, let alone our futures. The loss of all those lives sits heavy on the hearts of our community. We will never forget this day that's taken, ruined and scarred so many of our lives.

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: 

Dated: 28 / 06 / 18

Amina Yabajadda