

UK's Daily Mail tries to scapegoat resident for Grenfell Tower inferno

By Margot Miller and Robert Stevens
21 June 2017

Amid protests and growing demands for justice to be meted out to the political and corporate figures responsible for the dozens of deaths in the Grenfell Tower fire, the *Daily Mail* attempted to scapegoat a resident.

Stooping to new lows, on June 16, just two days after the fire, the *Mail* named the occupant of the flat where the horrific inferno that gutted the tower on the Lancaster West estate London allegedly began.

As well as naming Behailu Kebede, a father of one, originally from Ethiopia and employed as a taxi driver, the newspaper published five photos. One of the captions on a photo of Kebede stated that his 'faulty fridge started the Grenfell Tower inferno. ...'

The *Mail* tracked down Kebede, who they reported was in "emergency accommodation close to the scene of the disaster."

An indication of the impact of the *Mail* reporters' intrusive behaviour is given by the quotes from Katedi: "I am very upset'. Asked whether the fire started in his flat, he replied: 'I'm busy, I'm busy. Goodbye'."

According to all reports, after the fire began, Kebede immediately raised the alarm and tried to alert as many people as possible. One of Kebede's neighbours is even reported by the *Mail*, in the same article in which it disclosed his identity, as stating, "He knocked on the door, and he said there was a fire in his flat. It was exactly 12.50 am because I was sleeping and it woke me up. 'The fire was small in the kitchen. I could see it because the flat door was open. There was no alarm'."

Kebede cannot be blamed in any way for the fact that Grenfell was turned into a towering inferno within minutes in the early hours of June 14. Citing *BBC Panorama*, on Monday, the *Mail*, as part of an effort to distance itself from its earlier report, wrote, "Firefighters who successfully tackled the fridge fire

that started the Grenfell Tower thought their job was done and began to leave—only realising how quickly it had spread when they stepped outside. Units were called to what they believed to be a standard fridge fire at the doomed high-rise, and within minutes told residents the fire was out in the flat.

"The crew was leaving the building when firefighters outside spotted flames rising up the side of the building. ..."

The only reason for the *Mail* to disclose Kebede's identity was to deflect the growing anger of the population in London and nationally, who are demanding the real culprits be held responsible, towards a single individual.

Kebede's ethnic background is a not-insignificant aspect of his treatment by the *Mail*, given that we are dealing with a hate sheet that regularly churns out a torrent of anti-immigrant bile.

No one should accept the claim that the fire was even caused by a faulty fridge. The *Mail* report makes no mention of the warning made by the Grenfell Action Group, who posted in a blog last November: "The Grenfell Action Group believe that the KCTMO [Kensington and Chelsea Tenant Management Organisation—who ran the block on behalf of the local council], narrowly averted a major fire disaster at Grenfell Tower in 2013 when residents experienced a period of terrifying power surges that were subsequently found to have been caused by faulty wiring."

Such was the opposition to its article scapegoating Katedi that the *Mail* was forced to issue through gritted teeth a statement just hours after it was published, stating: "For the record *MailOnline* believes that, while much is still unclear, the blame for this tragedy lies squarely with those responsible for

managing and renovating the tower and the authorities in charge of the policies and safety regulations within which they were operating.”

The *Mail's* report met with such a groundswell of public hostility that its comments section solicited the following responses, from among 544 who overwhelmingly opposed the newspaper:

- “This is not his fault. In these tower blocks a fire is meant to be containable not spread in 15 minutes. He went to his neighbours and started banging on [t]heir doors to make them aware of what was happening.”

- “Not his fault. Faulty manufacturer of fridge and faulty construction of tower. That fire should never have spread the way it did. Most flat fires rarely spread beyond a floor or two. The only ones to blame are the ones who decided to save a couple pennies by slapping that cheap covering on the building.”

- “I feel so sorry for this man. He, like everyone else in that tower block didn't know they were living in a death trap. The blame lies elsewhere.”

- “He didn't cause the deaths. ... Remember there were no sprinkler system, inadequate fire escapes, poor building compl[i]ance & bad advice for the situation. Stop holding him up as the villain in this story.”

- “It was the building that was faulty because fires don't spread that fast unless there is something very flammable there.”

These comments reflect a growing oppositional mood within the population to the ruling elite.

The *Mail* article prompted about 1,300 complaints to the press watchdog, the Independent Press Standards Organisation (Ipsa). The *Guardian* reported that the complaints in their majority related “to privacy and harassment clauses in the editors' code. A number of complaints focus on intrusion into grief and shock.” It added, “The article ranks among the top five most complained-about to Ipsa.”

The response to the *Mail* is public recognition that Kebede, like all residents of Grenfell Tower, is a victim

of successive government policies that have aided and abetted corporate mass murder.

Far more important than where the fire actually began is why it was able to rapidly spread and sweep up the outside of the building in minutes, engulfing other flats and creating such a conflagration. This is because last year the building was covered in a combustible cladding that served to channel the fire upwards in a chimney effect. It is already established that the flammable cladding material was chosen by those companies overseeing the “refurbishment” of the tower because it was £2-per-square-metre cheaper than a fire-resistant alternative. The savings made amounted to just £5,000.

Grenfell Tower lacked any essential fire safety standards and was a death trap. There was no central fire alarm system, no sprinkler system and only one stairwell for escape.

In addition, some witnesses who escaped and local residents reported seeing blue flames as the tower set alight, which is consistent with the escape of gas. Recent work on the flats involved the gas supply. A number of residents and the Grenfell Action Group previously reported their concern to the KCTMO and Fire Brigade about exposed gas pipes.

The *Financial Times* reported that only in March, just three months before the fire broke out, the “Grenfell Tower's leaseholders association wrote to the London Fire Brigade complaining about the still-exposed gas pipe and its location in the stairwell. ... The pipe, the letter says ‘has put our life in danger and we don't feel secure in the building any more’.”

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