

Second fire at Dubai skyscraper underscores safety failures at Grenfell Tower

By Chris Marsden
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Dubai's Torch Tower was engulfed in flames early Friday morning for the second time since 2015. According to Dubai officials, the blaze damaged 64 of the building's 86-stories.

The scenes filmed were a chilling echo of London's Grenfell Tower inferno, with reports of burning cladding raining down from 40 to 50 floors high. Two cars in the parking lot were set alight by falling debris from the tower. So far, no official explanation has been given for the latest blaze in the building, one of the world's tallest.

The earlier blaze in the United Arab Emirates' largest city was attributed to the same type of cladding and insulation later used on Grenfell Tower, where a June 14 fire claimed over 80 lives.

No lives were lost yesterday at Torch Tower, or in the 2015 blaze that engulfed 60 floors—primarily because, unlike Grenfell Tower, the building's luxury flats are fitted with sophisticated internal fire safety features. A two-bedroom flat starts at \$500,000.

Friday's fire at the 337-metre skyscraper began around 1 a.m. on the ninth floor. It was fought by firefighters from four stations who had it under control by 3:30 a.m.

The building is the fifth tallest residential tower in the world as well as the 40th tallest structure. But firefighters were able to fight the inferno from inside the building, while residents could flee via smoke-free, fire-free safety zones enabling officials to successfully evacuate the 337-metre building's 676 apartments.

Yorkshire-born resident Lucy told the *Daily Mail* that she was woken by fire alarms at around 1 a.m. in her apartment on the 40th floor. In addition, the tower's security team triggered a system which “gave an automated call, email and text to all residents within minutes of the fire starting.”

Samia Badani, chairman of the resident's association at Bramley House, next to Grenfell Tower, told the newspaper, “They clearly took their duty to protect the safety of residents seriously and were organised.” The *Mail* reported that Badani “believed Grenfell residents were let down because of their social status and because they were poor and that local authorities were only interested in making the building look nice from the outside rather than being safe for those living inside.”

The second blaze at The Torch underscores the inherent danger in the widespread cladding of high-rise buildings. UAE authorities have acknowledged that at least 30,000 buildings across the country were clad in a manner that could cause fire to spread rapidly. Most of Dubai's 250 high-rise buildings have cladding panels with thermoplastic cores.

Cladding contributed to other major fires in Dubai - most notably the 2012 blaze started by a discarded cigarette that gutted the 34-storey Tamweel Tower and at a 63-storey luxury hotel on New Year's Eve in 2016.

In 2012, Dubai introduced legislation that outlawed foamed plastic insulation and required cladding for new buildings to be fire retardant. In 2013, it imposed restrictions on cladding new buildings over nine storeys tall, requiring owners of high-rise buildings with flammable cladding to install external sprinklers and a ring of fire retardant panels every three floors.

However, the rules were not applied to existing structures to protect the commercial interests involved. This exemption led to the latest fire at The Torch that struck before remedial work on the last fire was even completed.

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