

Britain 'going backwards' on rights of disabled, says U.N. committee

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GENEVA (Reuters) - The U.N. Committee on the rights of disabled people said on Thursday it had more concerns about Britain - due to funding cuts, restricted rights and an uncertain post-Brexit future - than any other country in its 10-year history.

The committee, which reviews states' compliance with the 2006 Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, published a 17-page report with recommendations about how Britain could do better.

"The UK is at the moment going backwards in accordance to the information that we have received," committee member Stig Langvad told a news conference in Geneva.

Britain said it was disappointed by the report. It said it did not reflect the evidence it had provided to the committee, nor did it recognise progress that had been made.

The U.N. committee's chairwoman Theresia Degener has described the situation in Britain as a "human catastrophe".

"The austerity measures that they have taken – they are affecting half a million people, each disabled person is losing between 2,000 and 3,000 pounds per year, people are pushed into work situations without being recognised as vulnerable, and the evidence that we had in front of us was just overwhelming," she said.

The most acute concern was the limitations on independent living.

"Persons with disabilities are in our view not able to choose where to live, with whom to live, and how to live," Langvad said.

Britain was also not fulfilling its commitment to allow inclusive education, and there was a high incidence of bullying at schools. A growing number of disabled people were living in poverty.

Budgets for local authorities had not only been slashed, but they were no longer ear-marked for disabled people, another committee member, Damjan Tatic, said.

Langvad said people with disabilities should be involved in preparations for Britain's Brexit talks with the European Union, to avoid losing protections that historically came from the EU.

"Persons with disabilities are afraid of the future since they do not know what is happening and since they do not feel that they are involved in the discussions on how to secure the rights of people with disabilities afterwards," he said.

Britain's government said it was a recognised world leader in disability rights, and almost 600,000 disabled people had moved into work in the last four years.

"We spend over 50 billion pounds a year to support disabled people and those with health conditions – more than ever before, and the second highest in the G7," a government spokesperson said.

Debbie Abrahams, the opposition Labour party's spokeswoman for Work and Pensions, said the "damning" report was a vindication of Labour's criticism of the government's policies.

"This confirms what Labour has been saying all along, that the lack of progress on all convention articles, including cruel changes to social security and the punitive sanctions regime, are causing real misery for sick and disabled people."

A Labour government would incorporate the convention fully into British law, she said in a statement.

Reporting by Tom Miles, editing by Pritha Sarkar and Richard Balmforth