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UK could be breaking international law over cladding - UN

Robert Booth
Social affairs correspondent

The UN has warned Britain that its failure to strip combustible cladding from tens of thousands of high-rise homes may break international law.

In a fresh headache for the housing secretary, Robert Jenrick, the global body is demanding answers about the UK government's delayed programme to fix hundreds of blocks wrapped in flammable panels and with other fire safety problems.

Leilani Farha, the UN's special rapporteur on adequate housing, wrote to the government "to express my serious concern about allegations of multiple violations of the human right to adequate housing, of which safety

is a key component - contrary to international human rights law".

Three years after the Grenfell Tower fire, which claimed 72 lives, there are still 300 high-rise residential and publicly owned buildings in England built or refurbished with similar aluminium composite cladding yet to be remediated, official figures show.

Many leaseholders have been living in fear that "Grenfell two is in the post". They face bills as high as £24,000 a month for fire wardens to patrol at night. Freeholders and developers are refusing to pay to fix the problems because legally they are not obliged to. Farha said: "Leaseholders' flats are unmortgageable and unsellable, with many only discovering this when they were in the process of moving home, therefore heavily

impacting their lives and consigning them to remain in homes that are at considerable risk from fire." Her term as rapporteur has now ended.

Nine out of 10 of 550 leaseholders and tenants surveyed by campaigners at the UK Cladding Action Group said their mental health had deteriorated as a direct result of fire safety problems.

The UN is warning the UK may have breached the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights. This includes the "right of everyone to an adequate standard of living for himself and his family, including adequate food, clothing and housing". Housing should be habitable "with adequate space and protecting them from cold, damp, heat, rain, wind or other threats to health," it says, while also protecting their physical safety.

States that ratified the covenant - as the UK did in 1976 - must show "every effort has been made to use a maximum of available resources in an effort to discharge their obligations".

300

The buildings in England built or refurbished with cladding similar to Grenfell Tower yet to be fixed

Ministers pledged £400m in May 2018 to strip social housing towers of aluminium composite material (ACM) panels. But only £133m has been spent, a National Audit Office report found. Of a further £200m earmarked in May 2019 to fix private blocks, only £1.4m has been spent

Rituparna Saha, the co-founder of UK Cladding Action Group and a resident of Northpoint tower in Bromley, Kent, welcomed the UN intervention, which was made public only after the UK government failed to respond.

"It is unthinkable that millions of innocent people are still forced to live in dangerous homes while being held financially and legally responsible for fixing catastrophic failings in building safety caused by a failure of the government's building regulations," she said. "The delay in response to this communication further lays bare their reluctance to deal swiftly with this housing crisis."

A spokesperson for the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government said: "We have given £1.6bn to help fund the removal of unsafe cladding ... we urge building owners, who have a legal responsibility to ensure their buildings are safe, to remove this cladding as quickly as possible."

Peers call for tougher digital rules to tackle 'pandemic of disinformation'

Peter Walker
Political correspondent

Ministers are being urged to toughen up regulation of digital and social media, because "a pandemic of misinformation and disinformation" is eroding trust in politics and public institutions.

A House of Lords committee on democracy and digital technologies, chaired by the film producer and Labour peer David Puttnam, called on ministers to push ahead with a long-mooted online harms bill, and new rules for online political advertising.

The 153-page report also said Ofcom should be given the power of new sanctions against tech firms that fail in their duty of care, including fines of up to 4% of global turnover, or blocking the sites of those found to be serially non-compliant.

The peers on the committee, who made the recommendations unanimously, argued too much power had been given away to a "few unelected and unaccountable digital corporations", such as Google and Facebook.

The impact of this, including the spread of inaccurate news and a lack of effective regulation in political advertising, was having a significant impact on trust in politics and institutions more widely, Puttnam said in his foreword. "This is a virus that affects all of us in the UK - a pandemic of misinformation and disinformation," he wrote. "If allowed to flourish, these counterfeit truths will result in the collapse of public trust, and without trust democracy as we know it will simply decline into irrelevance."

Among the recommendations is the creation of a regulatory committee on political advertising, comprising experts from the Advertising Standards Authority, Electoral Commission, Ofcom and the UK Statistics Authority.

This would develop a code of practice and system of sanctions for political advertising, to restrict "fundamentally inaccurate advertising during a parliamentary or mayoral election, or referendum".

In its response to the online harms white paper earlier this year, the government said Ofcom would be put



New face on the square

The visual artist Dreph, known for his large-scale murals, has created a new work on the set of BBC One's EastEnders. Located opposite the Queen Vic pub, it will become a permanent backdrop to storylines.