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Reuters

## Afghan war getting worse for civilians, ICRC says

By Rob Taylor and Mirwais Harooni

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KABUL - The Afghanistan war is getting worse for civilians, with armed groups on the rise across the country and access to healthcare deteriorating as foreign combat troops depart, the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) said on Monday.

Outgoing head of the ICRC delegation in Afghanistan, Reto Stocker, a seven-year veteran of Afghan aid efforts, said as the NATO-led war against the Taliban dragged into a twelfth year, the outlook for ordinary Afghans was increasingly bleak.

"Since I arrived here in 2006, local armed groups have proliferated. Civilians have been caught between not just one, but multiple front lines," Stocker told journalists in Kabul.

With NATO combat forces due to depart in 2014, aid groups and some Western diplomats are worried about a repeat of the vicious 1990s civil war that raged between rival ethnic-based factions, giving rise to the austere Taliban government.

Some security and aid workers in the north, once a centre for anti-Taliban resistance and where most of Afghanistan's untapped oil and gas resources are located, say insurgents and other armed groups are preparing for a security vacuum after the exit of foreign forces.

A security analysis prepared by the International Crisis Group think tank, also released on Monday, said President Hamid Karzai's increasingly unpopular government could collapse after

the NATO withdrawal, especially if people lost confidence in the outcome of presidential elections the same year.

"Plagued by factionalism and corruption, Afghanistan is far from ready to assume responsibility for security when U.S. and NATO forces withdraw in 2014," the ICG said.

"In the current environment, prospects for clean elections and a smooth transition are slim."

Adding to Karzai's woes, Western diplomats in Kabul say donors who together promised civilian aid worth \$16 billion over the next four years tied to serious efforts to combat endemic corruption, are losing hope that the government will deliver.

"Several countries are seriously considering pulling the plug," said one senior envoy who declined to be identified due to diplomatic sensitivities.

"BASELESS"

Karzai's chief spokesman, Aimal Faizi, said the ICG report had been discussed in a regular cabinet meeting on Monday and dismissed by senior ministers as "baseless and far from realities on the ground".

Stocker said he was confident there would not be a re-run of the 1990s civil war that followed the Soviet rush from the country, leaving once allied warlords to turn on each other.

In the fighting that set former president Burhanuddin Rabbani and his military commander, Ahmad Shah Masood, against the forces of rival anti-Soviet warlord Gulbuddin Hekmatyar, two thirds of Kabul was razed and about 50,000 civilians died. Thousands of women and children were raped and tortured.

"Afghans have seen too much war. They cannot take it any longer," Stocker said, adding that the country had seen vast improvements in health and education and the war-racked economy that most people would not want to see squandered.

The World Bank in its most recent Afghanistan assessment said while growth reached 8.4 percent in 2010/11, bolstered by big aid flows, the NATO pullout could halve that rate.

NATO figures released in August showed civilian casualties in the 11-year war were at their highest for several years, with the Taliban responsible for about 90 percent of deaths because of their use of indiscriminate roadside bombs.