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AFP

Afghan security the worst in a decade: UN

02/23/2011

The security situation in Afghanistan has worsened to its lowest point since the toppling of the Taliban a decade ago and attacks on aid workers are at unprecedented levels, a United Nations envoy said.

Robert Watkins, the outgoing UN deputy special representative of the Secretary General for Afghanistan, says from a humanitarian perspective, security "is on everyone's minds".

"It is fair to say that security in the country is at its lowest point since the departure of the Taliban," he said.

Mr Watkins says before last year's surge in NATO military forces, the insurgency was centred in the south and south-east of the country.

"Since the surge of NATO forces last year, we have seen the insurgency move to parts of the country where we've never seen before," he said.

"We've now confronted with security problems that we'd never dream that we'd have.

"While NATO is claiming that it has turned the corner... we still see these very difficult security problems."

UN relief agencies now have regular access to just 30 per cent of the country. Access is mixed

for another 30 per cent while there is hardly any access to the remaining 40 per cent.

Mr Watkins says a key issue is the "conflation of political, military, developmental and humanitarian aid".

"Because of the way aid is dispersed in Afghanistan... it has contributed to perception in parts of the Afghan population that somehow humanitarian work is lumped into this political and military effort," he said.

"We have to emphasise that we recognise that there has to be separation and we have to be very careful to try to address this perception."

But he pointed out that a positive development was that the international and Afghan military have publicly acknowledged that some kind of negotiated settlement was necessary to end the instability.

"[This year] can be a crucial year if there is a breakthrough in finding some kind of reconciliation efforts," he said.

The Taliban, a hardline Islamist movement, was forced from power in late 2001 after a US invasion launched in the wake of the September 11 attacks on New York and Washington.