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Reuters

Violence, tradition keep millions of Afghans from school

By Hamid Shalizi, Nick Macfie

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KABUL - Worsening security and enduring conservative Islamic customs prevented almost five million Afghan children from going to school in 2010, a government official said on Saturday.

The strict Islamist Taliban were ousted from power by U.S.-backed Afghan forces nearly a decade ago, but many women are still not able to work outside the home and girls are prevented from attending school in remote parts of the country.

Under the Taliban, women were barred from accessing health care and education and made to wear burqas covering them from head to toe. Only boys were allowed to attend school. Many of these customs are still widespread.

Girls have had acid thrown in their faces while walking to school by hardline Islamists who object to female education. Several girls' schools, including some in Kabul, have also been hit by mysterious gas poisonings blamed on Islamists.

Asif Nang, spokesman for the minister of education, said of 12 million eligible children, only seven million attended school.

"This is an alarming figure for us and the government is doing its best to pave the way for them," Nang told Reuters.

Violence is at its worst across Afghanistan with record deaths on all sides of the near-decade long conflict between Afghan and foreign forces and a Taliban-led insurgency.

Nang said that aside from the violence, the problem was made worse by a lack of female teachers in remote parts of the country where families were reluctant to allow their daughters to be taught by a male teacher.

Out of 364 districts in Afghanistan, there are no female teachers in more than 200 districts." he said.

In large parts of southern and eastern Afghanistan -- Taliban strongholds -- families still did not want their daughters educated, Nang said.