

Canada to extend Afghan mission -- maybe

by UPI

OTTAWA -- Canada's Parliament voted to extend its combat mission in Afghanistan into 2011 but only if NATO comes through with 1,000 reinforcements and aircraft. Canada's 2,500 troops were due to start returning to Canada next February 2009 but Conservative Prime Minister Stephen Harper pushed for an extension through December 2011, the Globe and Mail reported Friday. Opposition Liberals could have brought the minority government down and forced an election but most sided with the motion, which passed 198-77 Thursday night. However, the bill carries an escape clause that could maintain the 2009 pullout. When Harper meets with NATO leaders in April, he must secure guarantees of 1,000 additional troops, transport helicopters and surveillance drones to bolster Canadian troops in the violent southern Kandahar region, or the mission will end as previously scheduled, the report said. Referring to dozens of protesters outside Parliament during the vote, Canadian Defense Minister Peter MacKay said it was an expression of a "healthy, vibrant democracy," the newspaper said.

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