

Torture an internal problem for Afghanistan: Harper

(AFP) – Dec 23, 2009

MONTREAL — Prime Minister Stephen Harper said Canada is not responsible for any torture Afghan suspects might suffer after their arrest by Canadian military and transfer to local police, according to media report.

"We are trying to do what's possible to improve that situation, but it's not in our control," Harper said in an interview with TVA television published in La Presse daily.

Canadian politicians have for weeks been arguing over allegations that Canadian troops were handing over suspects for torture to local police in Afghanistan. The Harper government has flatly denied opposition charges it was aware of the situation.

In his interview, Harper pointed to Afghanistan's fledgling justice system and reiterated that Canada had no part in any torture cases in that country.

Regarding the mistreatment of prisoners, Harper said "the allegations are not being made, I hope, against Canadian soldiers," who he said carry out their duties in an exemplary fashion.

"We are speaking here of a problem among Afghans. It's not a problem between Canadians and Afghans," he added.

Canada is scheduled to withdraw some 2,800 troops from Afghanistan's southern region of Kandahar next year.

Harper's conservative government has for weeks been parrying accusations from a former Canadian diplomat in Afghanistan, Richard Colvin, that it ignored reports of Canadian forces detaining and handing over suspects for severe torture.

The Geneva Convention expressly prohibits combatants from handing prisoners over to any authority if there is a risk they might be tortured.

While the debate has drawn steady media attention, it has failed to stir public opinion. A recent Nanos poll found that only 49 percent of Canadians were aware of the torture controversy.

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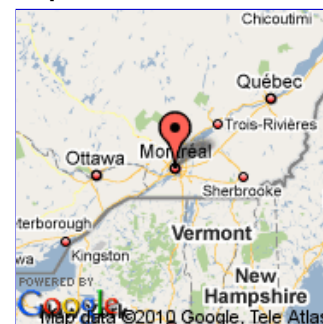
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