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The New York Times

Berlin Sets a Time Frame for Afghan Withdrawal

By Judy Dempsey

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With the public increasingly opposed to the war in Afghanistan, the German Parliament voted Friday to begin withdrawing the 4,900 soldiers serving there by the end of this year and to complete the withdrawal by 2014, the first time Germany has set a time frame for bringing troops home.

The United States has already concluded that American forces could begin withdrawing in July of this year. And Britain, which has 9,000 troops in Afghanistan, the second-largest number of troops after the United States, said last month it was “possible” that its troops could start leaving this year.

Germany has the third-largest contingent. The move Friday came during a vote, required annually, to extend the German mission for another 12 months. The mandate won overwhelmingly, with 420 lawmakers voting in its favor, 116 against and 43 abstentions.

The decision means that Chancellor Angela Merkel’s center-right coalition government is now committed to beginning the pullout this year — a demand made by the opposition Social Democrats.

The pullout is to be completed by 2014, when NATO hopes to complete the handover of security to Afghan forces. NATO has more than 150,000 troops in Afghanistan.

Guido Westerwelle, the foreign minister, said the decision represented a turning point in

the Afghan mission. “For the first time the German government has agreed not just extending the mandate but also agreeing on the perspective for withdrawal,” he said.

Mr. Westerwelle’s insistence that the new mandate include a specific reference to a withdrawal date had led to a public disagreement between him and Defense Minister Karl-Theodor zu Guttenberg.

Mr. Guttenberg wanted no specific date, arguing that any reduction of troops would be influenced by conditions on the ground. Faced with public opposition to the mission, as well as three scandals inside the armed forces, Mr. Guttenberg was in a more conciliatory mood Friday. He agreed to the wording of the mandate and the date of the troop withdrawal after insisting that the words “if the security situation allows” be included.

Frank-Walter Steinmeier, leader of the Social Democrats, hinted in interviews Friday morning before the vote that if Mrs. Merkel did not stick to the deadline, his party might vote against an extension of the next mandate. Opposition lawmakers said the wording was not firm enough.

That is why the opposition Green Party, which had agreed in the first place to send troops to Afghanistan back in 2001 when it was in coalition with the Social Democrats, abstained from the vote.

Claudia Roth, co-leader of the Greens, said the government’s strategy was “dangerously false” because it was not clear when the withdrawal would take place in practice.

Also on Friday, the Dutch Parliament backed a plan to send a mission to Afghanistan to train the military and the police.

Foreign Minister Uri Rosenthal told Dutch lawmakers that he would obtain assurances from the Afghan government that police recruits trained by the 500 Dutch personnel would not be used in military operations. The Dutch government pulled its troops out of Afghanistan last year after the previous government fell because of disagreements inside the coalition over whether to end the military mission.