WASHINGTON (Reuters) - President George W. Bush's demand for immunity for telephone companies that participated in his warrantless domestic spying program won a test vote on Monday in the Democratic-led U.S. Senate.

On a vote of 76-10, far more than the needed 60, the Senate cleared a procedural hurdle and began considering a bill to increase congressional and judicial oversight of the electronic surveillance of enemy targets.

It includes a provision to grant retroactive immunity to any telecommunication company that participated in Bush's warrantless domestic spying program begun shortly after the September 11 attacks.

Nearly 40 lawsuits have been filed accusing AT&T, Verizon and Sprint Nextel Corp of violating U.S. privacy rights.

Backers of immunity, who include some Democrats as well many of Bush's fellow Republicans, contend that companies should be thanked, not punished, for helping defend the United States.

But civil liberties advocates and a number of Democratic lawmakers argue that the courts should determine if any company violated the privacy rights of law-abiding Americans.

Regardless of Monday's vote, Democrats vow to offer amendments to remove the immunity provision while maintaining new surveillance safeguards that enjoy broad support.

(Editing by Patricia Zengerle)
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