

# AMNESTY INTERNATIONAL PRESS RELEASE

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## **USA: Renewed call for suspension as taser-related deaths pass 150 mark**

*"[It was] the most horrendous experience [of my life]. At one point I just pretended like I was dead because I thought....then they would stop."*

- Patricia Skelly, who has a mental illness, was tasered between nine and 15 times while in custody in jail and later in hospital.

Amnesty International today called on law enforcement agencies in the US to suspend the use of electro-shock taser weapons pending an independent, rigorous and impartial inquiry into their use.

The organization published a report, *"USA: Amnesty International's continuing concerns about taser use"*, that details the organisation's research on taser use in the US and expresses serious concern over:

- the significant year-on-year increase in taser related deaths;
- the lack of any independent and rigorous study into the health effects of the electro-shock devices;
- the fact that despite these safety concerns, tasers continue to be used in the US as a routine force tool rather than as weapon of last resort;
- continued reports of excessive use of tasers, in some cases amounting to torture or other cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment.

Amnesty International said that should law enforcement agencies in the US continue to use tasers, they should only be used strictly as a substitute for lethal force.

"The mounting death toll of people shocked by tasers makes the need for a full, independent and rigorous inquiry more urgent than ever," said Susan Lee, Director of Amnesty International's Americas Programme.

More than 150 people have died in the US after being struck by tasers since June 2001 -- 61 in 2005 alone -- and numbers are continuing to rise. Most who died were subjected to multiple or prolonged shocks. While in most cases deaths have continued to be attributed to factors other than the taser, such as "excited delirium" associated with drug intoxication or violent struggle, in 23 cases coroners have listed the use of the taser as a cause or a contributory factor in death.

In three cases in 2005, the taser was listed as a primary cause of death.

Amnesty International believes there may be more cases where the taser cannot be ruled out as a possible factor in the deaths. Recent studies have cited the need for more research into potential adverse effects from taser shocks on people who are agitated or under the influence of drugs or who are subjected to multiple or prolonged shocks.

Amnesty International's continued research into the use of the weapons, including a review of taser-related deaths since the publication of the organisation's previous report in November 2004, reveals that most who died after being shocked with tasers were unarmed men who did not appear to pose a threat of death or serious injury at the time that they were electro-shocked. The use of the taser was often accompanied by the use of restraints and chemical incapacitant sprays. Importantly, the organisation's research showed that most who died went into cardiac or respiratory arrest at the scene.

Studies conducted over the last year -- since the publication of Amnesty International's previous report -- have not met the organization's criteria for an independent, impartial and comprehensive study. The studies have been limited in scope and methodology and have relied mostly on data provided by one of the manufacturers of the weapons -- Taser International -- and police departments themselves. None of the studies has included an analysis of the deaths listed in Amnesty International's reports on taser use in the USA.

"Any study should be independent of any commercial or security interests and should be carried out by a reputable and independent party that has no connection to any manufacturer of these electro-shock devices," said Susan Lee.

The organization also expressed concern that tasers continue to be used as a "routine force tool" rather than as a weapon of last resort by law enforcement agencies in the US. In some law-enforcement agencies, the use of tasers is allowed if a person simply does not comply with an officer's demands.

"It is extremely disturbing that tasers are continuing to be used in circumstances in which the suspect does not pose a serious threat to police officers, the public or themselves -- especially given the serious safety concerns around their use," said Susan Lee. "These weapons should never be considered a 'low' or 'intermediate' force option."

Amnesty International is particularly concerned that vulnerable groups such as children, the disabled, pregnant women and people with mental illnesses are also being subjected to electric shocks from tasers -- in some cases amounting to cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment, or torture.

The organization said it continues to receive reports of individuals being subjected to taser shocks while already handcuffed or having been placed in mechanical restraints. It has also received reports of tasers being used to control unruly or uncooperative schoolchildren.

### **Background**

Tasers are powerful electrical weapons used by over 7,000 of the 18,000 law enforcement agencies in the USA. They are designed to incapacitate by conducting 50,000 volts of electricity into an individual's body. The electrical pulses induce skeletal muscle spasms that immobilise and incapacitate the individual, causing them to fall to the ground.

In November 2004 Amnesty International published a comprehensive report detailing its concerns over the use of tasers in the USA, calling for a suspension on their use and transfer pending an independent, rigorous and impartial inquiry into their use. See "USA: Excessive and lethal force? Amnesty International's concerns about deaths and ill-treatment involving tasers" AI Index: AMR 51/139/2004

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