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Amnesty International calls for restrictions on Taser use by US border police following death of Mexican migrant

Amnesty International is calling for a review of the US border patrol's policy on use of electro-shock weapons following the death of Mexican national Anastasio Hernandez earlier this week.

According to police sources, Anastasio Hernandez was detained on 28 May after re-entering the USA illegally through the US border with Mexico. He had reportedly been deported two months earlier. Customs and Border Patrol police reportedly hit him with a baton and used a Taser on him when he became "combative" as they tried to deport him to Mexico at the San Ysidro border crossing in California. He reportedly stopped breathing shortly after being tasered and was pronounced brain dead in hospital some 21 hours later; he was removed from a life support machine on Monday.

The San Diego medical examiner announced on Wednesday that he died of a heart attack, with signs of methamphetamine abuse and high blood pressure contributing factors; the manner of death was ruled a homicide. The amount of methamphetamine in his system was not reported.

While Amnesty International does not have full details of the incident, which remains under investigation by the US authorities, the organization is concerned by allegations that police resorted to unnecessary levels of force.

Amnesty International has serious concerns about the safety of electro-shock weapons such as Tasers, and considers them to be potentially lethal as well as open to abuse. The organization is calling for such weapons to be strictly regulated and used only in situations where they are necessary to protect life and avoid the use of firearms.

Since 2001, more than 400 people have died in the USA after being shocked with police Tasers. Although coroners have attributed most deaths to other causes, the Taser has been cited as a cause or contributing factor in more than 50 deaths. In many of these cases – like that of Anastasio Hernandez -- the deceased stopped breathing shortly after being shocked. There are other cases where the cause of death remains unclear.

Although some studies have found the risk of injury from Tasers and similar weapons to be generally low in healthy adults, there is concern that some individuals may be particularly vulnerable to adverse reactions from the shocks, for example, people suffering from underlying heart problems or being of small build. There is also concern by some medical professionals that the electro-shocks may contribute to cardiac or respiratory problems in people already compromised by police struggle, stress or drug abuse.

Amnesty International is calling for a full, impartial investigation of the facts in this case, with the results – including the autopsy findings - made public as soon as possible. The organization is also calling for the US Customs and Border Protection agency to either suspend

using Tasers or limit their use to situations where officers are faced with an immediate threat of death or serious injury that cannot be contained through lesser means.

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