

MSP Press release

The torture trade spreads while governments fail to act

Torturers are arming themselves with increasingly sophisticated equipment, and -- according to a new report released today by Amnesty International -- the trade in these devices is growing. The equipment includes high voltage electric shock stun weapons and chemical crowd control devices, while torturers continue to abuse old-style equipment such as restraint devices.

Amnesty International's report, "Stopping The Torture Trade", reveals that the international trade in high voltage electro-shock batons, shields, stun guns, and stun belts has been expanding throughout the 1990s. This includes 'tasers', which can shoot 'fishhook' darts on wires into victims up to thirty feet away, and stun belts, which are strapped to prisoners and operated by remote control devices. The belts have been known to set off accidentally thrusting about 50,000 volts through the prisoners' kidneys for up to eight seconds. This technology began in the United States, and has spread to Asia, Europe and South Africa.

"In the 1970s there were only two companies known to market high voltage electro-shock stun weapons, and now there are over 150 world-wide," said Brian Wood, one of the Amnesty International researchers who worked on the report.

"In the absence of stringent controls to prevent this equipment ending up in the hands of torturers, responsible governments must ban its export immediately," he added.

In the last two years, over 150 companies operating in 22 countries have been making or marketing electro-shock weapons. Now, Taiwanese, South Korean and Chinese companies probably manufacture more electro-shock stun weapons than companies in the USA. German, French and Israeli companies are also amongst the key manufacturers, and recently Polish, Russian, Czech, Mexican, Brazilian, and South African firms have joined in. The German government does not allow the weapons to be used in German prisons or by German police on German residents, but allows German companies to market and sell them for use abroad. The South African government is now actively promoting the sale of electro-shock belts in Asia, as well as using them on prisoners at home.

In one case cited in the report, Mohammed Naguib Adu-Higazi was arrested in Alexandria, Egypt, in 1997 by a State Security Investigations officer. While held at the SSI office, he was stripped of his clothes and given electro-shocks from a "cylinder-shaped stick with a spiral metal wire." He was reportedly deprived of food for three days, kept blind-folded throughout his nine-day detention, and threatened with sexual assault. Between 1997 and March 2000, the United States approved the export to Egypt of shock batons, stun guns and optical sighting devices valued at more than \$40,000.

"Stopping the Torture Trade," one of a series of reports to be released in Amnesty International's year-long campaign to Stop Torture, also highlights the trade by more than 40 companies in more conventional security devices that can be used for serious abuse of human rights, such as mechanical restraints and chemical sprays. A British company, Pains-Wessex, made tear gas grenades used on peaceful demonstrators -- many of them women and children -- in Zambia in 1997. Despite this, the UK Government's most recent annual report on arms exports reveals that in 1999 the UK granted licences for the

export of CS grenades and tear gas/irritant ammunition to Zambia. When UK tear gas was misused in Kenya and its supply was suspended, the Kenyan police were supplied from France. Some chemical weapons such as pepper gas sprays have been associated with many deaths in the USA and their international transfer must be suspended pending proper independent tests. A US company has supplied police with bursting pepper gas projectiles, used for the first time on protesters in Seattle in 1999.

Military, security and police expertise taught internationally has also been used for torture, according to the new report. Hundreds of graduates of the US School of the Americas have been implicated in human rights violations in South America. This military school is one of over 150 centres in the USA and abroad where foreign officers are trained. Public information on the human rights content of the training is minimal.

Amnesty International's report also cites French security training used in Togo for torture and intimidation of the civilian population. A high-ranking officer in the Togolese gendarmerie, accused by Togo's National Commission for Human Rights of ordering the torture of four people in August 1990, was subsequently awarded the decoration of the National Order of Merit by the French government. In another case, Israeli security officers paid and trained the guards and interrogators in the notorious Khiam detention centre in southern Lebanon until it was closed in May 2000, and the Israeli officers then used the information extracted under torture.

" Unless security training is strictly controlled and independently monitored, there is always a danger that it will be used to facilitate human rights violations," said Amnesty International.

"There is a crying need for concrete changes to be made to the way governments licence and monitor the manufacture, transfer and use of security equipment and know-how," added the organization.

In particular, Amnesty International calls upon governments to:

1) Ban the use of police and security equipment whose use is inherently cruel, inhuman or degrading. Ban the manufacture and promotion of this equipment and its trade to other countries. This should include leg irons, electro-shock stun belts and inherently painful devices such as serrated thumb-cuffs;

2) Suspend the international transfer of electro-shock, leg-cuffs, thumbcuffs, shackle boards, restraint chairs and pepper gas weapons pending the outcome of a rigorous and independent review into the effects of these devices. Suspend the use of high voltage electro-shock weapons pending the outcome of this review;

3) Ensure that the training of military, security and police personnel of another country does not include the transfer of skills, knowledge and techniques likely to lend themselves to torture.

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For more information please call Amnesty International's press office in London, UK, on +44 20 7413 5566 / Amnesty International, 1 Easton St., London WC1X 0DW web : <http://www.amnesty.org>