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UNITED STATES OF AMERICA: ELECTRO-SHOCK STUN BELTS -- TORTURE AT THE
PUSH OF A BUTTON

The introduction of a remote controlled electro-shock stun belt for use on prisoners in the United States of America (USA) appears designed to degrade and could be used to torture detainees, Amnesty International said today as it called on the US government to ban the use and export of the belt.

“This belt could allow prisoners to be tortured at the push of a button,” Amnesty International said. “Not only has this belt been activated accidentally as many times as on purpose, but there is a real possibility that it can be misused by officials to deliberately inflict pain, intimidate, humiliate and degrade prisoners.”

The Remote Electronically Activated Control Technology (REACT) belt inflicts a powerful electric current through the wearer’s left kidney which then passes through the victim’s blood and entire nervous system. The shock causes severe pain rising during the eight seconds and instant incapacitation in the first few seconds.

The REACT belt has been proposed for use on prisoners working in chain gangs in Wisconsin, and is now increasingly being used on prisoners during judicial hearings. Both of these uses are in direct contravention of international standards on the treatment of prisoners, the human rights organization said.

“Given the willingness of US companies and the US government to approve the sale of electro-shock technology to other states where there is clear evidence of the use of this type of equipment to torture prisoners, we are also extremely concerned that these belts will now fall into the hands of torturers,” the organization added.

Literature distributed by the belt’s manufacturers clearly indicates how using the belt can result in cruel, inhumane and degrading treatment: “*After all, if you were wearing a contraption around your waist that by the mere push of a button in someone else's hand, could make you defecate or urinate yourself, what would you do from the psychological standpoint?*”

Wearers are warned that the belt could be activated, from a distance of up to 300 metres, after “*any outburst or quick movement ... any tampering with the belt ... failure to comply with a verbal command for movement of your person ... [and] any loss of visual contact by the officer in charge*”.

So far, neither the manufacturers nor the users of the belts have conducted strictly independent medical studies of effects on humans of the belts. In fact, the company cites a doctor in Nebraska who stated that he tested the company's devices on anaesthetized pigs and they are therefore safe to use on people "*under circumstances of proper usage*".

Data from other electro-shock weapons indicate that the high pulse 50,000 volt shocks lasting eight seconds at a time could result in longer term physical and mental injuries. Although the belt is described as non-lethal, other similar electro-shock weapons used by law enforcement officers in the USA, such as the "taser" gun have contributed to deaths.

Despite this, it is reported that the US Bureau of Prisons, as well as the US Marshals' service and more than 100 county agencies have obtained belts, as well as sixteen state correctional agencies including Alaska, California, Colorado, Delaware, Florida, Georgia, Kansas, Ohio and Washington.

Amnesty International's report cites examples of prisoners appearing in US courts wearing such belts which have been activated, including:

- November 1993: Edward Valdéz was incapacitated in front of waiting jurors after he left the courtroom -- "*he screamed and crashed into the wall and fell down, and was out for about a minute...*" -- said the California prosecutor.
- November 1994: it was reported that a police officer had activated a belt worn by a defendant charged with murder, from outside a courtroom in Florida.
- December 1994: defendant Bruce Sons was accidentally incapacitated by the belt while talking to his defence attorney during a break in a pre-trial hearing in California.
- April 1995: James Oswald, a defendant in Wisconsin, was made to wear a stunbelt and shackles despite appearing in court in a wheelchair. Oswald claimed he was stunned twice and his attorney claimed that the belt was part of an attempt by police to torture his client.

Amnesty International is calling on the US government to immediately establish a full, independent and impartial inquiry into the use of stun belts other electro-shock weapons, and to immediately suspend their use until independent medical evidence can clearly demonstrate that their use will not contribute to deaths in custody, torture or other cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment or punishment.

The organization is also calling on the US government to halt the transfer of electro-shock stun technology to governments where there is clear evidence of electro-shock torture -- such as China, the Lebanon, Russia, Saudi Arabia, Venezuela and Zaire. It is reported that in the Netherlands, Scandinavian countries, Switzerland and the United Kingdom electro-shock weapons other than cattle prods are treated as prohibited weapons.

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