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Governments must tackle the "pain merchants"

Governments' failure to control the expanding trade in and use of security equipment is contributing to the incidence of torture and ill-treatment, reveals Amnesty International in its new report *The Pain Merchants* published today.

The latest research by the human rights organization highlights how a wide range of police and prison services are misusing old technologies and being encouraged to use new ones despite a lack of rigorous testing to establish if they are consistent with international human rights standards:

- Steel batons with spikes have been offered for sale at a police equipment fair in China.
- A metal and plastic projectile fired by a police officer permanently injured a woman in Switzerland in March this year, leaving fragments in her face which cannot be removed for fear of paralysis. This occurred before any other means of control had been attempted.
- More than nine tonnes of leg irons (an implement banned by UN rules for the treatment of prisoners) were exported from the USA to Saudi Arabia during 2002.
- Since the report went to press AI has discovered a South African government tender notice of 31 October 2003 calling for bids for the supply to the Department of Correctional Services of leg irons and belly chains, as well as electronic riot shields.
- The UK government has authorised trials on Britain's streets of the taser gun - which delivers a 50,000 volt electric shock through two darts fired from a distance, or can also be used up close as a stun gun. In AI's opinion it has yet to publish full medical tests on the taser's effects.
- Sedative chemical incapacitating agents such as the one which killed more than 120 hostages when Russian security forces ended a siege in a Moscow theatre last year should be banned unless it can be proved that people will be protected from any indiscriminate or arbitrary effects.

"Just because security equipment may be described as 'less than lethal' does not mean it cannot be abused, nor that it cannot injure or kill, said Brian Wood, Amnesty International's expert on security equipment. "We are extremely concerned that in many countries devices are being authorised for use on the population without sufficient investigation of their effects on human rights."

The USA, one of the largest manufacturers of electro-shock equipment, is one of the few governments requiring export licences to be issued for the transfer of electro-shock weapons. Yet during 2002 the US Department of Commerce authorised the exports of equipment falling into a category that includes electro-shock stun devices to 12 countries where its own State Department had reported the persistent use of torture.

The Pain Merchants also reveals that the number of companies manufacturing electro-shock weapons is increasing despite continued reports of electro-shock torture across the world in 87 countries since 1990

For the period 1999-2003, there have been at least 59 manufacturers of electro-shock weapons in 12 countries: Taiwan, China, South Korea, USA, France, Israel, Russia, Brazil, Czech Republic, Mexico, Poland and South Africa, according to Amnesty International. For the years 1990-1997 the figure was 20 manufacturers.

Few governments properly control the manufacture, sale or export of policing and security equipment. And with the few that do make an attempt, the system does not seem to work.

The European Commission has drafted a Trade Regulation which if implemented would ban the export from member states of equipment whose primary practical purpose is torture (such as leg irons and stun belts); and strictly control the export of equipment which the Commission considers has a legitimate policing use but which can be used in torture (eg electro-shock stun weapons, tear gas).

Amnesty International welcomes this move towards control, but is concerned that the draft Trade Regulation should be strengthened. Several items listed in the proposed EC Trade Regulation as having "legitimate" law enforcement use are items which AI has found to be used for torture or ill-treatment, and whose effects on human rights have been insufficiently investigated - such as stun guns, taser guns and pepper spray. AI is calling for these to be suspended pending rigorous independent investigation.

Amnesty International is calling for:

1. A ban on the use, manufacture and transfer of equipment whose primary use and design is torture or ill-treatment, such as electro-shock stun belts, leg cuffs, serrated thumb cuffs and batons with spikes
2. A suspension on the use, manufacture and transfer of equipment designed for security use but which evidence has shown can lend itself to torture and ill-treatment, pending a rigorous and independent inquiry into its effects - including electro-shock stun guns and tasers, and pepper spray
3. A prohibition on the export and use of any equipment that may lend itself to torture and other human rights abuses unless the receiving party has established strict rules in line with international human rights standards to regulate the use of it, such as tear gas, batons and handcuffs.

BACKGROUND

- Amnesty International reported torture by police or security forces in 106 countries last year.
- There are now at least 856 companies in 47 countries involved in the manufacture or marketing of weapons described as being a "less than lethal" alternative to firearms, many of which easily lend themselves to torture.

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