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USA: The stun belt - cranking up the cruelty

The increasing use of the electro-shock stun belt and other stun weapons in the USA is ratcheting up the level of cruelty tolerated in the country's response to crime, Amnesty International said today, launching a new report.

"As the number of inmates in US prisons and jails continues to spiral, the threat of severe electro-shock to control their behaviour is becoming commonplace," Amnesty International said, "The stun belt is also increasingly bringing cruelty into courtrooms across the country."

Amnesty International's report includes recent allegations of torture and ill-treatment with such weapons in local jails, state prisons and private facilities.

"Electricity has been one of the torturer's favoured tools in the second half of the 20th century," Amnesty International said. "The USA's growing use of high-tech stun weapons dangerously blurs the line between torture and legitimate prisoner control techniques."

The report names more than 130 US jurisdictions believed to have the stun belt, a device which can subject its wearer to an eight-second 50,000 volt electric shock by remote control. It is mainly used on inmates perceived to be a security risk during trial or transportation.

The stun belt is one weapon among a growing array of electro-shock devices used by police and prison agencies across the USA. Others devices include the stun gun, stun shield and taser. The latter, which gained global notoriety in the 1991 Rodney King beating, transmits an electric shock to its human target via barb-tipped wires.

"Among electro-shock weapons, the use of the stun belt, even when not activated, violates international human rights law," Amnesty International stressed.

The belt caused an international outcry in 1998 when Californian defendant Ronnie Hawkins was electro-shocked in open court for repeatedly interrupting the judge. His subsequent lawsuit led to a federal court ban on the belt in Los Angeles County. The county's appeal against this ban will be heard in court in late June.

Since Amnesty International wrote its report, the federal government, itself a big stun belt user, has filed a special petition - an *amicus curiae* brief - supporting Los Angeles County in its efforts to overturn the ban. Amnesty International will present its own *amicus* to the court.

"The stun belt is a weapon that is worn by its victim," Amnesty International explained. "To be effective, it relies on the wearer's fear of the severe pain and humiliation that could follow activation. Such fear is a leading component of the mental suffering of a victim of torture or cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment which is banned under international law."

Characteristically, the US government ignores international standards in its *amicus* brief, and argues instead that the stun belt meets its own domestic criteria. It contends that the belt has been

activated on thousands of officers, does not cause “excruciating pain”, and is medically safe, pointing to promotional material issued by the main manufacturer, Stun Tech.

“As part of their training in the use of the Stun Tech belt, officers can volunteer to receive a shock from it,” Amnesty International said. “They wear it for a few minutes, and are able to prepare for the shock. That cannot be compared to a prisoner being forced to wear a belt, often for hours at a time, never knowing if it might be activated, deliberately or by accident.”

Amnesty International points out that Stun Tech video footage of officers receiving electro-shocks dispels the myth that the stun belt does not cause severe pain, adding that the company’s claims for the safety of stun weapons stem from tests conducted on anaesthetized pigs.

Proponents of the stun belt, including the federal government, say that it is worn only by the highest risk inmates, and is an effective way to prevent escape or acts of violence.

“Effectiveness must not be the only criterion,” argues Amnesty International. “If a company invented a vest of razor wire, which could be made to automatically tighten on its wearer, and promoted it as an ‘effective’ way to restrain prisoners, would we sanction its use? No, because international standards demand that humanity be a part of the equation.”

Furthermore, evidence is emerging that use of the stun belt is not being reserved for maximum security inmates, but that it is becoming more routine in some jurisdictions. Amnesty International cites the use of stun belts during the transportation to hospital of low and medium security prisoners held in a special segregation unit in New Orleans.

“Given that the prisoners are held in this unit because of their HIV status,” said Amnesty International, “it appears that they are being arbitrarily subjected to the stun belt because of their medical condition and not their security status.” The stun belt is also used on medium security prison work crews in Wisconsin.

Even children are not exempted from the stun belt Amnesty International said, citing the case of two 17-year-olds recently made to wear the belt at their pre-trial hearings. “Perhaps it should come as no surprise that the country which leads the world in executing child offenders, tolerates a device which threatens them with pain and humiliation at the touch of a button.”

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