

AMNESTY INTERNATIONAL

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Canada: Amnesty International concerned about use of tasers

Amnesty International continues to be concerned about the use of tasers – dart-firing electro-shock weapons -- by law enforcement officers.

In a recently released report, Amnesty International outlines how the use of tasers by law enforcement officers in Canada raises a number of concerns. The first is the more serious, but less widespread incidence of death following taser use, while the second is the pervasive inappropriate use of the weapon.

The organization is concerned that police officers are using the weapon in ways which may be harmful or exacerbate dangers from other restraints. In the fifteen month period from May 2005 to August 2006, six individuals died after being shocked with a taser. All of the six men were shocked multiple times with the weapon and all but one of the men was subjected to multiple force techniques, including shocks, pepper spray, physical force and restraint holds.

This is despite a warning contained in a report by the Canadian Association of Chiefs of Police in 2005 that “police officers need to be aware of the adverse effects of multiple, consecutive cycles” of a “Conductive Energy Device (CED)”.

While coroners in Canada have not listed taser shocks as a cause of death or a contributory factor in any of the fifteen deaths recorded since 2001, Amnesty International believes a link between deaths and taser shocks cannot be ruled out. In the USA, coroners have listed the taser in autopsy reports as a contributory factor in more than 30 deaths in recent years.

The report presents Amnesty International’s assessment that tasers are not being used appropriately by police officers in Canada. The cases included in the report -- such as the use of the weapon to rouse an unconscious man -- indicate that tasers are being used too readily by law enforcement officers and too low down the use-of-force scale and not as a weapon of last resort. The evidence presented suggests that taser use in Canada falls far short of meeting international standards, which among other things stipulate that force should be used only as a last resort and that the amount of force must be proportionate to the threat encountered and designed to minimize damage and injury.

Amnesty International maintains its position that the use of stun guns by law-enforcement officials anywhere should be suspended until a thorough, impartial and independent investigation into the medical and other effects of the weapon. The report ends with a series of detailed recommendations on safer use of the taser for those police departments who continue to use the weapon.