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USA / Canada: Pattern of abuse -- suspend use of taser guns

More than 70 people in the USA and Canada have died since 2001, after being electro-shocked with taser guns. While coroners have generally attributed cause of death to factors such as drug intoxication, in at least five cases they have found the taser played a role.

"Tasers have been used by police officers against unruly schoolchildren; unarmed mentally disturbed or intoxicated individuals; suspects fleeing minor crime scenes and people who argue with police or fail to comply immediately with a command," said Amnesty International today as it launched two new reports examining the use of taser guns in the USA and Canada.

Evidence suggests that, far from being restricted to narrowly-defined circumstances in order to avoid lethal force, tasers have become the most prevalent force tool in some police departments. More than 5,000 law enforcement and correctional agencies in 49 US states are currently reported to be deploying or testing taser equipment, with the take-up rate continuing to grow. In Canada approximately 60 police departments have been issued with tasers.

Despite being widely deployed, there has been no rigorous, independent and impartial study into the use and effects of tasers, particularly in the case of people suffering from heart disease, or under the influence of drugs.

"Many experts believe taser shocks may exacerbate a risk of heart failure in people who are under the influence of drugs or suffer underlying health problems such as heart disease, risk factors present in many of the cases we examined," said Amnesty International.

Tasers have been purchased by the US army, including for use in Iraq. The US Air Force is reported to deploy tasers aboard aircraft carrying suspected al-Qa'ida members to Guantánamo Bay, Cuba. While few details have been provided about the use of tasers by US military forces, one of the units deploying them in Iraq in 2003 was the 800th Military Police Brigade, accused of grave abuses in Abu Ghraib prison.

New generation tasers have also been purchased, or are undergoing testing, by police or military forces in other countries, many of them known for their poor human rights records. Countries currently using or testing tasers include: Argentina, Australia, Canada, France, Germany, Israel, Malaysia, Mexico, Spain, Turkey, the United Arab Emirates and the United Kingdom.

"Portable and easy to use, with the capacity to inflict severe pain at the push of a button without leaving substantial marks, electro-shock weapons are particularly open to abuse," said Amnesty International.

Amnesty International's report on the use of tasers in the USA also cites several cases in which parents have been prosecuted for child cruelty after using stun weapons to discipline their children. Stun weapons have also been reportedly used during the commission of crimes, or as instruments of torture or abuse, including of women by abusive partners or former partners. Amnesty International's report recommends that the sale of stun weapons for private use be subject to strict controls.

Amnesty International acknowledges that there may be situations where tasers can effectively be used as "stand-off", defensive weapons as an alternative to firearms in order to save lives. However, it appears that in practice tasers are rarely used as an alternative to firearms in the USA and most departments place them at a relatively low level on the "force scale".

"The growing death toll underscores the urgent need for the US and Canadian governments to set up a serious, independent inquiry into the impact of the use of taser guns."

Such an inquiry should be carried out by acknowledged medical, scientific, legal and law enforcement experts who are independent of commercial and political interests in promoting such equipment. A report of the findings of such an inquiry should be made public promptly after completion of the study. All transfers and use of tasers should be suspended until such an inquiry is carried out.

Background Information

Taser guns are dart-firing electro-shock stun weapons designed to cause instant incapacitation by delivering a 50,000 volt shock. Tasers fire two barbed darts up to a distance of 21 feet (6.4 metres), which remain attached to the gun by wires. The fish-hook like darts are designed to penetrate up to two inches of the target's clothing or skin and deliver a high-voltage, low amperage, electro-shock along insulated copper wires. They can also be used without the darts, close-up, as stun guns.

Amnesty International includes information on 74 taser-involved deaths, based on a range of sources, including autopsy reports in 21 cases. Most of those who died were unarmed men who, while displaying disturbed or combative behaviour, did not appear to present a serious threat to the lives or safety of others.

For further media materials, visit: www.news.amnesty.org.

For a full copy of the reports, please see:

"USA - Excessive and lethal force? Amnesty International's concerns about deaths and ill-treatment involving police use of tasers":

<http://web.amnesty.org/library/index/ENGAMR511392004>

Canada - Excessive and lethal force? Amnesty International's concerns about deaths and ill-treatment involving police use of tasers, please see:

<http://web.amnesty.org/library/index/ENGAMR200022004>

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