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SOUTH AFRICA: AMNESTY INTERNATIONAL CALLS FOR FULL INQUIRY AND  
SUSPENSION OF THE USE OF ELECTRO-SHOCK WEAPONS

Amnesty International is appalled by the deaths and serious injuries of civilian commuters in South Africa yesterday morning in an incident which appears to have been triggered by the inappropriate use of force by security guards using electric shock weapons.

Amnesty International is calling on the South African Government to immediately institute a thorough investigation into the incident, examining the use of electro-shock weapons and the entire security guard industry.

“We have repeatedly warned of the dangers to human rights arising from the rapid spread of electro-shock weapons as well as the dangers arising from inadequate training of law enforcement officials and security personnel,” Amnesty International said today.

“These weapons make it very easy for law enforcement officers or private security guards to inflict severe pain and to incapacitate a person, or to psychologically threaten them.”

At this stage, Amnesty International knows that the description of the electro-shock weapons as “black rods” fits that reported to the organization in another instance of torture by South African soldiers using electro-shock weapons in February 1994.

The private security guard industry is at least six times larger than the formal police force. Earlier this year, South African human rights groups documented human rights abuses committed by members of various security guard companies, and called for an independent inquiry into the inadequately regulated industry. Amnesty International supports this call. The inquiry should thoroughly examine the type of training given to security guards.

The South African Government should ensure that the regulations governing the conduct of all employees of security companies who carry out functions similar to law enforcement officials are not in contradiction with the UN Basic Principles on the Use of Force and Firearms by Law Enforcement Officials.

Amnesty International has details of two South African companies based in Johannesburg which have been marketing various types of “black rods” electro-shock weapons. One of the South African companies claims to have sold such weapons to other countries, including some with persistent records of torture such as Indonesia and China. Companies in Germany, the UK and the USA which have marketed such weapons claimed to have South African associates.

Amnesty International takes no position on the arms trade or the security trade as such, but is concerned that the transfer and use of electric shock weapons will contribute to human rights violations such as torture or ill-treatment. In order to prevent this, the human rights organization is calling on the South African Government to:

- establish a rigorous independent inquiry into the use of all types and variants of electro-shock weapons, to assess their medical and other effects in terms of international human rights standards regulating the use of force and the treatment of prisoners; the inquiry should examine all cases of deaths or injury resulting from the use of such instruments, and the results of the inquiry should be published without delay;
- immediately suspend the use of electro-shock weapons unless and until independent medical evidence can clearly demonstrate that the likely practical use of any such weapons for law enforcement will not contribute to deaths or injury arising from excessive or inappropriate use of force or contribute to torture or other cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment or punishment;
- prohibit the export of all electro-shock weapons to any country where such weapons are likely to contribute to extrajudicial killings, torture or severe ill-treatment, for example to refuse any export licence where it is proposed that electro-shock weapons be transferred to a country with a record of electric shock torture and ill-treatment;
- conduct a thorough investigation into whether previous exports of electro-shock weapons from South Africa have been used for electro-shock torture and ill-treatment.

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## **BACKGROUND ON THE EFFECTS OF ELECTRO-SHOCK WEAPONS**

Fears of deaths and serious injury have led to the prohibition of electro-shock stun technology weapons in some parts of the USA as well as in other countries in Western Europe whose law enforcement officers use other means to restrain prisoners. In the Netherlands, the Scandinavian countries, Switzerland and the United Kingdom (UK) electro-shock weapons other than cattle prods are reportedly treated as prohibited weapons, although a few companies in some of those countries have attempted to tranship them. The Greek Government has reportedly outlawed the use of such weapons by law enforcement agencies following cases of severe ill-treatment by the Greek police. These cases were investigated by the European Committee for the Prevention of Torture in 1994.

Research conducted and published by the UK Home Office Forensic Science Service in 1990 on a range of earlier lower voltage stun guns made in Korea, Taiwan and the USA showed that they can cause high levels of pain and incapacitation using a succession of high peak, short duration impulses (as opposed to the low voltage regular alternating current of a cattle prod or low voltage baton which produce localised pain).

Victims experience pain differently. In a laboratory test, a young woman “*described extreme pain in the area of her leg where the stun gun was applied. Her leg was jolted by the shock and kept on shaking uncontrollably; she was unable to move for some period of time. Once incapacitation had worn off, her leg remained stiff.*” The current was found to move along low resistance routes within the human body, for example blood channels and nerve pathways. The impact of electro-shock weapons is not affected by layers of clothing over the skin. “*For each pulse received there is likely to be a rapid shock extending throughout the body including the brain and central nervous system.*”

The UN Basic Principles on the Use of Force and Firearms require governments to take steps to ensure that arbitrary or abusive use of force is not used by law enforcement officers, and that *“the development and deployment of non-lethal incapacitating weapons should be carefully evaluated in order to minimise the risk of endangering uninvolved persons, and the use of such weapons should be carefully controlled.”*(Principle 3). ENDS\