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ARMING THE TORTURERS: ELECTRO-SHOCK TORTURE AND THE SPREAD OF STUN TECHNOLOGY

Modern electro-shock stun weapons are fast becoming the torturer's high-technology tool of choice, Amnesty International said today, as it called for the banning of exports to any country where electro-shock torture has been committed or where torture is persistent, and for an immediate suspension of their use for law enforcement.

In a major new report, the organization said it is believed that torturers sometimes prefer using electric shock torture because they think it will not leave permanent marks as evidence on their victims' bodies.

According to "Roberto", a 50-year-old university professor in Zaire who was detained and tortured for four weeks after trying to organize a peace forum in 1991, his initial beating with sticks was stopped when an officer said "*it will leave scars and we will get complaints from Amnesty International*".

The response was to resort to electro-shock torture, which "Roberto" describes as: "*This type of weapon... I could really call it something really horrible -- immoral -- because those people who make it for torture, they don't test it on their own bodies and they don't know the pain it causes. They do it to make other people suffer quite simply to make money. It's very sad.*"

In its report, the organization details how widespread the production, sales, advertising and misuse of electro-shock and stun technology is becoming. Amnesty International has documented electro-shock torture in 50 countries during the 1990s, including 18 countries where modern hand-held devices have been used. At least 100 companies around the world have marketed such weapons.

"This is a fast-growing industry, whose products are often not properly tested and many of whose 'clients' are well known to have used the products to routinely and systematically torture men, women and children," Amnesty International said. "Yet many governments -- including the USA which is the largest producing country -- allow this trade and some such as France have even helped to promote it."

Amnesty International has for many years campaigned against electro-shock torture using instruments such as cattle prods. Increasingly, however, modern high-pulse and high-voltage stun weapons are being designed specifically for use on humans. Unlike cattle prods, which can be used to immobilise or cause localised pain, stun weapons are designed to inflict severe pain in a few seconds or even milli-seconds and can temporarily incapacitate a person.

This pain was described by Mediha Curabaz, a 25-year-old female nurse who was tortured by officers at the Political Branch of Adana Police Headquarters in Turkey during 1991, who said "*they thrust the electric truncheon violently into my sexual organs and I felt a pain as if I was being drilled there with an electric drill. They immediately lay me down on some ice. I started to bleed at this stage and fainted...before I had come fully round, they forced me to sign various papers*".

Victims have been tortured, often repeatedly, with shocks applied to armpits, necks, faces, chests, abdomens, the inside of the legs, soles of the feet, inside mouths and ears, on genitals and inside the vagina and rectum. Immediate effects include severe pain, loss of muscle control, convulsions, fainting, and involuntary defecation and urination. Longer-term effects can include muscle stiffness, impotence, scarring, as well as post-traumatic stress disorder.

The organization is calling on all relevant governments to refuse any export licence for electro-shock weapons to be transferred to a country where persistent torture and ill-treatment have been reported. Amnesty International is urging the establishment of independent public inquiries into the use of these weapons, and for an immediate halt in their use for law enforcement until independent medical and other evidence clearly demonstrates that their likely use will not contribute to unlawful killings and cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment or punishment.

Amnesty International is also calling on companies involved in the trade not to transfer electro-shock weapons to countries with a persistent record of torture.

“By knowingly trading electro-shock weapons with torturers, company salesmen and directors are responsible for their misuse,” Amnesty International said. “If these weapons are meant for lawful law enforcement and are safe, we want to see the companies prove it. If the users of these weapons need training, we want to see the proof that training is being given to all clients, including those in other countries. When they supply weapons to other countries, we want to see the guarantees that they will not be used for ill-treatment.”

Amnesty International’s concerns about electro-shock stun weapons

In its report, Amnesty International highlights particular types of electro-shock stun weapons.

Stun guns and batons

Research conducted by the United Kingdom government found that even earlier-generation lower-voltage stun guns can cause high levels of pain and incapacitation, and have the potential to cause death through loss of coordination of heart muscle contraction. According to one supplier’s advertisement, a design feature in its modern stun gun is an automatic switch-off after 15 seconds of use. However, research showed that a three-to five second discharge was enough to incapacitate someone for up to 15 minutes. Since their invention, suppliers’ advertisements indicate that the voltage has increased from 10,000 to up to 250,000 volts, although such information is of limited use in assessing how much pain they can inflict because data on power and other factors is rarely provided.

Electro-shock shields

Following the death of Harry Landis, a Texas (US) prison officer who accidentally activated an electro-shock shield in 1995, an engineer who conducted tests on the shield concluded: “*The manufacturer puts in its literature that the shield will not hurt anyone, including people with heart conditions. But they have not done studies on people at all. They conducted their tests on animals - anaesthetized animals.*”

Taser guns

These guns shoot two wire-trailing darts with hooks up to 30 feet, and are used in some US states. According to a 1991 forensic pathologist’s report, “*certain medical conditions, including drug use and heart disease, may increase the risk that the taser will be lethal the 16 taser-related deaths in Los Angeles indicate a failure of the taser as a non-lethal weapon In my opinion, the taser contributed to at least nine deaths...*”

Stun belts

Two US companies have produced remote-controlled electro-shock stun belts, and the belts have increasingly been used on defendants appearing in court, with presiding judges sometimes holding the remote-control. The belts inflict eight-second shocks using 50,000 volts through the wearer's body, which causes instant immobilization, self-defecation and self-urination and leaves welts. It is claimed that the belts can be activated from a distance of 300 metres or more, after "*any outburst or quick movement*", "*any tampering with the belt*" [and] "*any loss of visual contact by the officer in charge*".

Despite claims that stun belts are medically safe, one manufacturer admitted that no strictly independent medical tests have been carried out on its belt. Instead the company cites a doctor in Nebraska who tested the company's stun guns on anaesthetized pigs. Instruction manuals warn that stun belts should not be used on pregnant women, persons with heart diseases, multiple sclerosis, muscular dystrophy or who are epileptic. However, the US Bureau of Prisons does not carry out medical examinations of all prisoners before deciding who should wear a stun belt.

Tear gas stun weapons

Some companies in China, Taiwan and the USA have started manufacturing stun batons which also dispense tear gas or pepper gas. However, sparks from electro-shock weapons can ignite inflammable substances such as alcohol propellant used in such sprays. In 1990, New York Police Department officers reportedly sprayed an emotionally disturbed boy with a crowd control chemical and then allegedly shot him with a taser gun, which somehow started a fire. The boy was said to have suffered first and second degree burns.

The Production And Sale Of Stun Weapons

Amnesty International has identified more than 100 companies in industrialized countries including Belgium, China, France, Germany, Israel, South Africa, Taiwan and the US which have offered to supply stun weapons since 1990. Of these, the US accounts for almost half the total number of suppliers. Stun weapons are increasingly marketed through magazines and exhibitions. Taiwanese stun batons have been exhibited in Shanghai, Brazilian stun batons in Washington, Chinese and Russian stun batons in Paris, and South African stun batons and riot shields in Israel and the Palestinian Authority.

Virtually all companies which market electro-shock weapons claim they are non-lethal if used properly. Some companies offer training as a means to ensure safety, but such training is not available to all those able to acquire electro-shock weapons. For example, one stun belt manufacturer, while offering up to six hours training to customers intending to use it in the USA, said it was nevertheless willing to sell the belts to China or Saudi Arabia without providing training.

However, the prohibition on such weapons by a number of governments results from a recognition that they may too easily lead to unnecessary suffering, serious injury and even death. In Belgium, Canada, the Netherlands, Luxembourg, the Scandinavian countries, Switzerland, the UK, and other Commonwealth countries, electro-shock weapons other than cattle prods are reportedly treated as prohibited weapons. In some countries such as the UK, however, the ban does not appear to include "third country" trafficking. Spokespeople for UK companies have admitted arranging sales to China via Hong Kong and Cyprus through a "South African associate", and were willing to sell to Lebanon and Zaire via "third countries".

Despite this recognition, there has been little attempt by most governments in supplier countries to strictly regulate transfers of electro-shock weapons to countries whose law enforcers practise torture and severe ill-treatment. The US government approved the export of taser guns to

Saudi Arabia, electro-shock shields to Mexico and stun guns to Venezuela. A French company admitted to having supplied to countries in North Africa, while a major German supplier publishes its catalogue in Russian and Arabic. Chinese companies are increasingly promoting their products in Asia and in Europe, while Taiwanese companies export to the USA, Asia, and South Africa, and one described Eastern Europe as “a booming market”.

Countries Where Electro-shock Torture Has Taken Place

Amnesty International has documented instances of electro-shock torture in at least 50 countries since 1990, from Algeria to Zaire.

In **China**, the use of electric batons has become so widespread and endemic that it is difficult to document the number of victims. Four girls aged under 16 and two young men detained in Fuxin, Liaoning province in early 1995, were given shocks with an electric baton by a Public Security section chief intent on making them “confess” to “hooligan and promiscuous behaviour”. Two Tibetan brothers, Pasang, aged 19, and Tenzin, aged 11, described how they were tortured in prison. Pasang said: *“They poked an electric baton in my face, my mouth”*, while Tenzin said: *“They put the electric baton inside my mouth...It burnt me badly and gave me a wound. It was terrible.”*

In August 1996, Chen Longde, a pro-democracy activist from Zhejiang province, attempted to commit suicide by jumping from a third story window. Labour camp officials reportedly admitted later that he had jumped through the window after being beaten with electric shock batons.

In **Cyprus**, a 1995 government report confirmed that various people detained in Limassol Town Police Station during 1992 were tortured with electric shocks to various parts of the body, including the penis. In one case, Stelios Xenophontos Neofitou was handcuffed, stripped and wet with water before being hung upside down and allegedly given electric shocks to various parts of his body including his genitals. Although Stelios Neofitou saw the police with an electro-shock baton before he was tortured, he could not prove that this was the actual instrument used for the torture.

In **Lebanon**, Amnesty International has received reports that prisoners were tortured with electric batons at the Ministry of Defence during 1994.

Electric shock torture has been widely used in **Saudi Arabia**. In May 1994, Gulum Mustafa, a Pakistani national, was said to have been severely tortured in a detention centre for drug offenders in Jeddah shortly before he was transferred to Priman Prison. The torture included insertion of a metal stick into his anus and electric shocks. He reportedly was left bleeding and unable to walk, and was not given any medical attention. The US government has approved the export of taser guns to Saudi Arabia.

One of the electro-shock weapons Amnesty International is concerned about in the **USA** is the use of remote-controlled stun belts, particularly on defendants appearing in court. In November 1993, Edward Valdéz was incapacitated in front of waiting jurors after he left courtroom and in December 1994, Bruce Sons was accidentally stunned while talking to his attorney during a break in a pre-trial hearing in California. In 1995, James Oswald was made to wear a stun belt and shackles despite appearing in court in a wheelchair. He claimed he was stunned twice in what his attorney called an attempt by police to torture his client. Amnesty International believes that these belts are specifically designed to be degrading.

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For more information, to receive a copy of the report or to arrange an interview, please call:

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