

AMNESTY INTERNATIONAL PUBLIC STATEMENT

AI Index: AMR 20/013/2009

29 July 2009

Amnesty International reiterates call for restrictions on Taser use following Braidwood report.

Amnesty International is renewing its call on governments around the world to restrict the use of Tasers and similar stun weapons, following the findings of the Braidwood commission of inquiry in Canada that such devices are potentially lethal. As one of the most detailed inquiries into the weapon to date, Amnesty International believes that the findings must be taken seriously.

The inquiry, led by retired Justice Thomas Braidwood, QC, took place in 2008 and focused on Taser use in the province of British Columbia (B.C.). His report was issued last week.

After reviewing evidence from a wide range of sources, including research studies and experts in cardiology and electrophysiology, Justice Braidwood concluded that “conducted energy weapons” (CEWs) such as Tasers had the potential to fatally disturb the heart rhythm, even in healthy individuals, particularly when the CEW probes were placed across the chest.

He found that the risk of dangerous arrhythmias increased in people who had cardiovascular disease; whose heart was already stimulated through intense pain or stress; who were “thin” with “smaller skin-to-heart distance”; wore heart pacemakers; or were subjected to repeated shocks.

The report recommended that the threshold for using CEWs should be raised from “active resistance” (the most common threat level at which it was deployed by police in B.C.) to cases where individuals presented a bodily threat – and only when less extreme measures had been exhausted or were ineffective. It also recommended that all officers deploying Tasers should carry defibrillators (electrical devices used to restore normal heart beat) and should generally limit any CEW use to one five-second shock.

Amnesty International considers that the Braidwood findings are particularly significant as the potential and theoretical health risks described in the report appear to be demonstrated in actual death cases.

The findings reflect many of the concerns raised by Amnesty International in its recent study of deaths following Taser use in the USA. In a report published in December 2008, *Less than Lethal? The use of Stun Weapons in US Law Enforcement*, Amnesty International reviewed scores of deaths since 2001 and found they raised serious concern about safety and reliability of such weapons.

Many of the individuals who died were subjected to prolonged or repeated shocks, and in a significant proportion of the fatalities the deceased had heart disease or were shocked in the chest.

Most of the 334 fatalities in Amnesty International’s study involved people who were disturbed or intoxicated; however, in some cases, the deceased had no drugs in their system or underlying health problems but collapsed shortly after being shocked.

A further concern is that most of the individuals in Amnesty International’s study did not appear to present a serious threat when they were shocked with Tasers; 90% were unarmed.

Based on the potential health risks linked to such weapons and their potential for abuse, Amnesty International continues to call on governments and law enforcement authorities to either suspend their use or limit the deployment of Tasers to life-threatening situations.

Concern about the TASER X3

Given the above findings, Amnesty International is concerned by the launch this week of a new Taser International product, the TASER X3. The TASER X3 allows officers to discharge three consecutive Taser shots without the need to reload the cartridge and, according to company literature, “can even

simultaneously incapacitate up to three subjects with a single X3 unit". The single shot capability of the older models currently in use is described on the company's website as a "significant drawback".

Amnesty International is disturbed to see the marketing of a new product with a built-in capacity to quick-fire consecutive shocks, in view of longstanding concerns about the potential health risks from multiple deployments.

Although current models, such as the Taser X26, allow officers to inflict repeated shocks by pressing the trigger once the Taser probes are attached to the subject, officers have to reload the cartridge to fire a second set of probes. This provides a built-in break on multiple discharges of the probes and allows officers to stop to evaluate the situation, as required by a growing number of law enforcement policies.

Background

The Braidwood inquiry was established following the death of Polish immigrant Robert Dziekanski at Vancouver airport in October 2007 minutes after he was shocked five times by Royal Canadian Mounted Police (RCMP) officers. He is one of 26 people to die in Canada since 2003 after Tasers were deployed against them. More than 360 similar deaths have been reported in the USA since 2001.

Although most deaths have been attributed to factors such as drug intoxication or a condition known as "excited delirium", medical examiners and coroners have concluded that Taser shocks caused or contributed to more than 50 deaths in the USA.

The Braidwood inquiry made 19 recommendations for restricting, monitoring and reporting on use of Tasers in B.C. These have reportedly been accepted by the B.C. government. The Braidwood report also called for further safety studies, including a review of any new CEW weapons.

Among its findings, the Braidwood report noted that many of the individuals subjected to police Tasers were emotionally disturbed and cited the "unanimous" testimony from mental health experts that de-escalation and crisis intervention techniques, not electro-shock weapons, were the appropriate response.

Last week's report focused on the general use and safety of Conducted Energy Weapons. The Braidwood inquiry's findings relating to the Dziekanski case itself will be published later.

Dart-firing electro-shock weapons such as Tasers, which disrupt the central nervous system by causing uncontrollable muscle contractions, are commonly known by various terms, including Conducted Energy Devices (CEDs), the term used by Amnesty International in most of its reports. Amnesty International's December 2008 report on US deaths following Taser use can be downloaded at: <http://www.amnesty.org/en/library/info/AMR51/010/2008/en>

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