

European governments arming police with “non-lethal weapons”

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‘Non-lethal Weapons’ Tackle Protests Against Globalisation

By Julio Godoy

PARIS, Oct 26 (IPS) - Several European governments are arming their police forces with a new range of “non-lethal weapons” to put down protests against globalisation, and among immigrants.

Governments in France, Switzerland, Germany, Spain, and several other countries have ordered such weapons, or are about to, even though human rights groups are warning that the supposed “non-lethality” of the guns is a myth, and that they actually can kill people.

The most widespread “non-lethal weapon” is the stun gun Taser, that discharges electric shocks. Technically that should only paralyse the person shot at, and cause intense pain.

But in a report released Sep. 27, the human rights groups Amnesty International (AI) affirms that the stun gun might have caused “more than 290 deaths of individuals in the USA and Canada struck by police Tasers” between June 2001 and Sep. 30 this year.

“While (AI) does not reach conclusions regarding the role of the Taser in each case, it believes the deaths underscore the need for thorough, independent inquiries into their use and effects,” the report says.

The number of deaths caused by Taser stun weapons might actually be higher than claimed by Amnesty International. In the most recent case earlier this month, Canadian police killed Robert Dziekanski, a Polish immigrant, who had been screaming and throwing things around at Vancouver airport, with a Taser stun gun.

Despite such incidents, former German police officials publicly praise use of Taser stun guns against demonstrators as harmless yet efficient. So far in Germany, only special police commandos are equipped with such guns.

Friedhelm Krueger-Sprengel, former official at the ministry of defence, says “the non-lethal weapons give police and army forces wider latitude in action.”

Krueger-Sprengel told IPS that “security forces can act against a rebellious population without pulling the weapons immediately. With the Taser guns for instance, police and army officers can impose themselves more easily, in the sense that their power has a larger spectrum, so that rebellious people cannot react against them.”

Rainer Wendt, director at the German Police Officers Union, says “the police need weapons that do not kill, but which hurt and cause wounds, in order to control demonstrations. Otherwise, we are declaring open season on our police officers in battles against violent demonstrators.”

A rationale for non-lethal weapons was presented by Kay Nehm, former German attorney general, in July 2006 at a conference on ‘Future Security’ in Karlsruhe city, some 550 km southwest of Berlin.

“The necessary assessment (on home security) begins with the changing social underlying circumstances, namely the economic upheavals associated with globalisation, and the smaller financial possibilities of governments and municipalities to meet the growing prosperity discrepancies between the have and have-nots in our society,” Nehm said at that conference.

According to Nehm, these social and economic upheavals, which others associate with imposition of neo-liberal economic policies, “will surely lead to more social sacrifices and difficulties, which represent new risks of fractures within society, and are the natural hotbed for radical, extremist, terrorist challenges.”

Such challenges can only be mastered by security forces with non-lethal weapons, which do not cause a blood bath at demonstrations, Nehm said.

Thomas Gebauer, of the German non-governmental organisation Medico International, interprets these justifications for non-lethal weapons as a symbol of the growing repressive character of European and North American governments, and of their readiness to violently suppress protests against the spreading social injustice.

“The development of such weapons aims at securing the growing social inequality, at ensuring that the poor do not have a chance of showing their discontent against the rich,” Gebauer told IPS. “The aim of these weapons is to guarantee social borders, to install perennial control of movements, to restrict democracy.”

In France, a Chinese immigrant woman was seriously wounded Sep. 1 after police agents shot at her with Taser pistols. The police officers tried to question the woman, an irregular kitchen worker at a Japanese restaurant in Paris. As she resisted identification, they first shot at her with their stun weapons.

According to the official version, the woman did not react to the electric from the stun gun, and tried to attack the police officers, who then pulled their standard guns and shot her.

About 3,000 French police officers are equipped with Taser stun guns. But following the rebellion of immigrant youth during the autumn of 2005 in the suburbs of Paris, municipal authorities have been demanding authorisation from the central government to equip more of the police with such non-lethal weapons.

On Oct. 16, the ministry of the interior in Paris announced that it will amend regulations to allow local community police to be equipped with stun guns.

In Switzerland, the National Council (the national parliament) voted in early October to equip immigration police forces with the Taser stun gun for use against irregular immigrants who may resist deportation.

Some of the police themselves have resisted the move. Roger Schneeberger, general secretary of the Swiss Cantonal Police Directors, said at a press conference Oct. 3 that "it suffices to use handcuffs and chains during deportation of immigrants."

Other non-lethal weapons being discussed in Europe are laser pistols that cause temporary blindness, bean bags, which are small bags shot from barrels containing up to 150 small shots, gases, sticky foams, heat emitting screens, and high-tone sirens audible only to people under a certain age. (END/2007)

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