

# The Taser is going wireless

By [Global Research](#)

Global Research, December 03, 2007

Toronto Star 3 December 2007

Theme: [Militarization and WMD](#), [Police State & Civil Rights](#)

Consisting of stackable arrays of six “darts,” Taser’s Shockwave technology — which will likely go to market next year — will be used for military applications, says a company spokesperson, “not for a riot in Toronto.”

Alarmed by recent incidents? Wait’ll you see what the company is planning for 2008

Dec 02, 2007 04:30 AM

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The Taser is going wireless.

Until now, the electric-shock gun consisted of two barbed darts attached to wires that shoot out and strike the victim, immobilizing the person with 50,000 volts of electricity, causing severe pain and intense muscle contraction.

But the wires could only extend a few metres. With the new “extended range electronic projectile,” or XREP, the Taser has been turned into a kind of self-contained shotgun shell and can be fired, wire-free, from a standard shotgun, which police typically have in their arsenal already.

The first electrode hooks on to the target, the second electrode falls and makes contact elsewhere on the body, completing the circuit and activating the shock. It can blast someone as far as 30 metres away, and, unlike the current stun guns, whose shock lasts five seconds, the XREP lasts 20 seconds, enough time to “take the offender into custody without risking injury to officers.”

Taser International spokesperson Steve Tuttle says the XREP would be perfect in a standoff. “Here’s someone you just don’t want to get anywhere near,” he says.

The XREP is one of two major new applications the Scottsdale, Ariz., company is preparing to field test, a prospect that makes Taser’s critics anxious. They say more study is needed of the old products, let alone the new.

Tasers are sparking all sorts of questions and concerns these days.

Like death after Tasing. Polish immigrant Robert Dziekanski died after the RCMP Tased him

when he'd become agitated after spending 10 hours inside the secure area at the Vancouver airport.

Or questionable Tasing. University of Florida student Andrew Meyer was Tased even though a handful of officers had already piled on top of him after he refused to stop asking former presidential candidate John Kerry questions at the microphone. (He's the one who uttered that now infamous plea that has spawned bumper stickers and T-shirts: "Don't Tase me, bro!")

Tasers are now used by more than 11,000 law enforcement agencies in 44 countries. There are more than 428,000 Tasers in the field, not to mention the tens of thousands of Tasers that have been sold to civilians.

And the innovations keep coming.

Besides the XREP, the company has developed a device meant to keep someone from approaching a certain area – a tactic called "area denial." "What if you could drop everyone in a given area to the ground with the simple push of a button?" asks a dramatic promotional video for the "Shockwave."

Taser has turned its weapon into a connected series of six darts arranged in an arc. The company says the device can be extended in a chain or stacked "like Lego," depending on the needs of the user.

So an army platoon, for instance, could use it to prevent unwanted people from approaching their camp, and not have to risk getting close to their targets.

Amnesty International, which has raised concerns for years, says the Shockwave poses serious risks of inappropriate use. When you target an entire area, or a crowd, you can't distinguish between the individuals you're trying to restrain, says Hilary Homes, a security and human rights campaigner for Amnesty International Canada.

"It targets everybody to the same intensity or effect," Homes says. "With materials like that, you worry about ...arbitrary and indiscriminate use."

Tuttle says the technology will be used for military applications, "not for a riot in Toronto."

Amnesty says that between 2001 and Sept. 30, 2007, there were more than 290 deaths of individuals struck by police Tasers in North America, including 16 in Canada. It reports that only 25 of those electroshocked were armed, and none with firearms. It's calling for a moratorium on their use by police until a full, independent inquiry is held.

Homes says the new shotgun-style Taser doesn't pose any risks that aren't already there with the older weapon, except that "this allows more things to be done from a greater distance."

Mostly, it's the concern over the expansion of this technology even as there is heated debate over the devices' safety. "We'd prefer there weren't new variations until a study of the central technology was done," she says.

The safety concerns revolve around the growing number of deaths following Tasing and

the increasing use of the term “excited delirium” by the company and other experts to explain the deaths, while denying the weapon any culpability.

Excited delirium is a catchall phrase to describe symptoms of extreme stress, such as disorientation, profuse sweating, paranoia, and superhuman strength.

When someone is in such a condition – heart racing, blood pressure bursting, fight-or-flight hormones like adrenalin coursing through their body – wouldn’t a giant electrical jolt just make things worse?

“Show me the medical and mechanical reasons why it would make it worse when doctors are telling us, when someone is in that situation you should treat it as a medical emergency and get that person to a medical trauma centre in the quickest way,” Tuttle says. “With no Taser, he’s impervious to pain, agitated, slippery with sweat – you won’t get control in five seconds. Maybe you’ll use batons, which won’t work, pepper spray, which is much more stressful, a bean-bag round, maybe deadly force because the situation spins out of control?”

Dr. David Evans, the Toronto regional supervising coroner for investigations, says that while there’s no proof to say the shock could make things worse, “I agree potentially it could.” But, he adds, “why aren’t they dropping dead immediately?”

Evans says that it doesn’t seem to make sense that the Taser is at fault in the deaths, because the deaths have not been instantaneous. “Normally you’d expect that if someone was going to die from electrocution related to electrical discharge, they’d die right there and then, within a few seconds,” he says.

Tasering doesn’t cause changes in the heart rhythm, or arrhythmia, which leads to death, he says.

It’s a view that Ontario’s deputy coroner, Dr. Jim Cairns, has used to help shape the Toronto Police Services Board policy toward allowing Toronto police to use Tasers. Cairns also spoke at a Taser tactical conference in Chicago last July about excited delirium.

Taser points out that the weapon has not been implicated in any of the deaths in Canada. “We’re just repeating what the medical examiners are saying,” says Tuttle. “The vast majority of those cases have been excited delirium or (drug) overdose.”

Even though “excited delirium” isn’t an accepted medical diagnosis, it may be listed as a “contributory factor” in police-custody deaths, Evans says, but not as the primary cause.

Taser isn’t the only company developing electrical stun weapons. Indiana-based Xtreme Alternative Defense Systems has, in a prototype phase, a futuristic weapon that sends out a streak of lightning, apparently by projecting an ionized gas or ionizing the air itself with a laser, which conducts the electricity forward. The technology could potentially also be used to disable vehicles and, in the future, to help militaries neutralize incoming rocket propelled grenades.

Taser expects its new products to be available by mid-2008.

ENDNOTE

Taser International has taken the classic marketing of fear, wrapped it up in the joyful

colours of Christmas, and made Santa its salesman.

For the latest push of its civilian- and female-aimed Taser product, the compact C2 – about the size of a TV remote and available in pink – the catch line is: “What does Santa bring you when you have been good but the world is getting bad?”

A scornful Santa is apparently reading the world’s “naughty” list. For \$300 to \$350 (U.S.), you could have a C2 of your own.

Should images of Christmas, traditionally linked with peace and goodwill, be used to sell something encircled by violence and fear?

Taser makes no apologies. “On the contrary,” says spokesperson Steve Tuttle. “When there’s over 1.4 million violent attacks in America, you’re doing the responsible thing for a loved one if you can provide them with protection.”

Taser has sold more than 161,000 devices to civilians since 1994. (None in Canada. They’re not legal for civilians and won’t be shipped here.)

Brash marketing is Taser’s forte. Yesterday it sponsored a poker tournament in Las Vegas called “Beauty and the Bet” in which the winners got to party with the Playboy Playmates. It was a benefit for the families of fallen police officers.

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