

Tasers targeted as lethal

Amnesty International cites Pomona deaths

By David Bradvica
Daily Bulletin

POMONA — An international human rights organization has singled out the 1996 deaths of two suspects in the custody of Pomona police in a report that calls for law enforcement agencies to immediately suspend the use of taser weapons so their effects can be better studied.

Amnesty International's 153-page report on what it views as human rights abuses in the U.S. criminal justice system said both suspects died after being shot with a taser by Pomona police.

But former Pomona police Chief Rick Shaurette said investigations into the deaths showed that each was caused by the suspect's drug use, not by the taser.

"If there are any indications that the taser was dangerous, we wouldn't use it," said Shaurette, who retired Oct. 1. "It's not my call anymore, but I don't see how suspending its use to study their use would help. There's no reason to believe that it is a lethal weapon that could cause death."

The taser has been popular since the 1980s as a "less-than-lethal" weapon designed to stun or temporarily disable unruly or uncooperative suspects. A taser is a hand-held device that shoots two barbed

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—Former Pomona police Chief Rick Shaurette

hooks into the subject's clothing from a distance; the current, typically 50,000 volts, is transmitted through the wires.

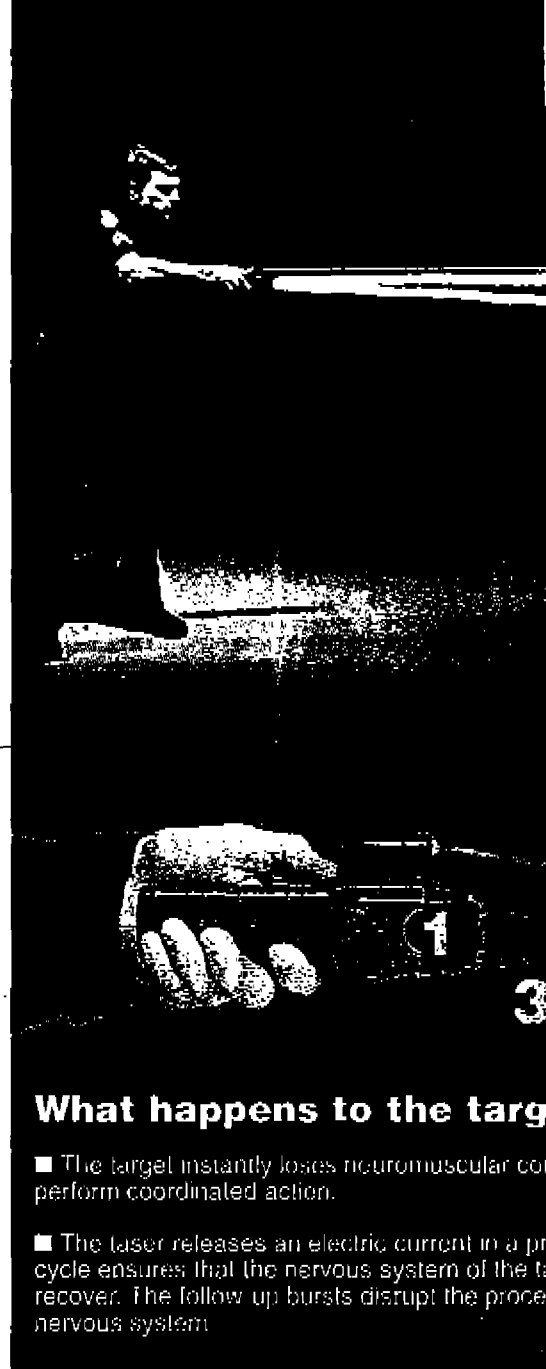
It is seen as an alternative in situations where lethal force is not required.

Amnesty's report said the Pomona deaths were among several reported deaths following the use of tasers, but Amnesty national board chairman Paul Hoffman said the organization has no specific figures on taser-related deaths.

"It's not easy to get that kind of data," said Hoffman, a Santa Monica lawyer. "But it seems like a larger pattern — that these cases are not isolated instances. Our job is to point out the potential problems in their actual use and ask whether their effects ought to be studied. We think they should be."

Tasers under fire

■ Two people died after being tased in the custody of the Pomona Police Department in 1996. Amnesty International in its report on human rights abuse in America, called for a temporary ban on the weapons so their effects can be better studied.



What happens to the target

■ The target instantly loses neuromuscular control and cannot perform coordinated action.

■ The taser releases an electric current in a pulse cycle ensures that the nervous system of the target cannot recover. The follow up bursts disrupt the processing of the nervous system.

The first incident in Pomona involved a 29-year-old Lancaster woman who was subdued by a taser in July 1996 after she was pulled over and arrested on suspicion of driving under the influence of illegal drugs. The woman died about a year later. A 31-year-old Pomona man was being shot with a taser at the time of his arrest. He died in a combative

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Tasers under fire

■ Two people died after being tased in the custody of the Pomona Police Department in 1996. Amnesty International cited the deaths in its report on human rights abuse in America, logo at right, and called for a temporary ban on the weapons so they can be studied.



What happens to the target?

- The target instantly loses neuromuscular control and any ability to perform coordinated action.
- The taser releases an electric current in a preset time sequence. This cycle ensures that the nervous system of the target doesn't instantly recover. The follow up bursts disrupt the process of re-equilibration of the nervous system.

How does it work?

■ The taser uses a replaceable air cartridge module (1) that fires out two probes (2) up to 15 feet at a speed of 135 feet per second. These probes are connected to the power handle by a high-voltage, insulated taser wire (3). When the probes make contact with the target, 50,000-volt impulses are carried along the taser wire and into the suspect. These taser waves (4) can penetrate 2 cumulative inches of clothing, including leather.

Glen Friedman/Daily Bulletin

The first incident in Pomona involved a 29-year-old Lancaster woman who was subdued by a taser in July 1996 after she was pulled over and arrested on suspicion of driving under the influence of illegal drugs. The woman

died about 1½ hours after her arrest. Five months later, a 38-year-old Pomona man died after being shot several times with a taser at the Pomona police station, where officers said he was combative.

Both cases were investigated by Los Angeles County Sheriff's deputies and the Coroner's Office. In both cases, investigators determined the deaths had nothing to do with the use of the taser, Shaurette said.

Even U.S. violates basic human rights

For the first time, London-based Amnesty International shines its spotlight on police brutality, prison cruelty and capital punishment in the United States.

By **DAVID A. LOVE**
Knight Ridder

In the next few months, I will travel throughout the United Kingdom and Ireland on behalf of Amnesty International. I will not be investigating human-rights violations there. I will be discussing the human-rights violations that are occurring right here in the United States.

At the 12 universities where I will be giving presentations, I will draw attention to police brutality, prison cruelty and capital punishment in the United States. My part is but a small role in Amnesty's unprecedented focus on the United States. For the first time in its 37-year history, the London-based organization has launched a major campaign in a Western nation.

As a kick-off to the yearlong effort, Amnesty released a report called "United States of America: Rights for All." The 153-page report highlights a "persistent and widespread pattern of human-rights violations." The overwhelming majority of the victims are racial and ethnic minorities.

Police brutality is a longstanding problem throughout the United States. Some police departments are guilty of a pattern of abuse and misconduct. During traffic stops, searches, arrests and investigations, police officers shoot, beat, choke and hog-tie unresisting suspects. Civilians make thousands of complaints every year, and cities pay millions of dollars to settle police-abuse lawsuits. Nevertheless, few offending officers face severe punishment for their actions.

Women and children are subjected to abuse in American prisons. As of June 1998, at least 3,500 juveniles convicted as adults were placed in the same facilities as hardened adult criminals, exposing them to a high risk of sexual and physical violence. Female prisoners have been beaten, raped and prostituted by prison guards. Many pregnant inmates are reportedly shackled, some while in labor.

Prison officials in the United States also use electro-shock de-

of equipment at their disposal which at times is contributing to human-rights violations."

The most disturbing of these devices is the remote-control stun belt. At the push of a button, it shocks prisoners with 50,000 volts for eight seconds. According to the manufacturer, the belt can cause people to involuntarily defecate or urinate. The U.S. Bureau of Prisons, the U.S. Marshall's Service and more than 100 counties and 16 states use the stun belt.

The taser is a hand-held weapon that shoots barbed forks into a subject's clothes by way of electrically charged wires. In July 1996, police in Pomona, Calif., killed Kimberly Lashon Watkins with a taser. Five months later, a handcuffed Andrew Hunt Jr. died after Pomona police shot him several times with a taser.

More than 3,000 police departments in the country have also approved the use of pepper spray. Since 1990, according to the Amnesty study, more than 60 people have died in police custody after they were exposed to this chemical agent.

Chain gangs are in use in several states, including Alabama, Arizona, Florida and Wisconsin. Although chains and leg irons are forbidden by international law, U.S. law does not prohibit their use.

With more than 3,300 inmates awaiting execution, the United States has the largest death-row population in the world — many of them sentenced without adequate legal representation. The death penalty is applied in a racially biased manner in the United States. Amnesty reports that since 1977, 82 percent of people executed were convicted of murdering whites, although blacks and whites are victimized by violent crime in nearly the same numbers. Further, the execution of mentally-retarded and juvenile offenders in the United States violates international standards.

The United States claims to be the protector of human rights around the world. In light of the

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AUTOPSY REPORT

No.
96-09471

HUNT, ANDREW

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SECTIONS:

Routine sections of major organs and tissues are submitted in formalin for storage.

PHOTOGRAPHY:

Photographs of the body are taken.

WITNESSES:

Detectives Rodriguez and Seeger of LASD Homicide Bureau.

OPINION:

It is concluded that the death is one produced by the metabolic and thermal effects of excited delirium associated with cocaine abuse. The contribution, if any, produced by infliction of taser dart wounds remains problematic.

S. L. Riley, Jr.
SOLOMON L. RILEY, JR., M.D.
DEPUTY MEDICAL EXAMINER

4/24/97
DATE

SLR:rs:c
T-2/25/97

COUNTY OF LOS ANGELES


DEPARTMENT OF CORONER

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AUTOPSY REPORT

No.
96-09471

HUNT, ANDREW

I performed an autopsy on the body of 
at the DEPARTMENT OF CORONER

Los Angeles, California on DECEMBER 30, 1996 @ 0915 HOURS
(Date) (Time)

From the anatomic findings and pertinent history I ascribe the death to:

(A) **EXCITED DELIRIUM ASSOCIATED WITH COCAINE ABUSE**

DUE TO, OR AS A CONSEQUENCE OF

(B) DUE TO, OR AS A CONSEQUENCE OF

(C) DUE TO, OR AS A CONSEQUENCE OF

(D) OTHER CONDITIONS CONTRIBUTING BUT NOT RELATED TO THE IMMEDIATE CAUSE OF DEATH:

Anatomical Summary:

- I. History of sustaining multiple taser dart wounds during episode of apparent excited delirium.
- II. Refer to Toxicology Report and Supplemental Report.
- III. Refer to Microscopic Report (Form 14).

COUNTY OF LOS ANGELES

DEPARTMENT OF CORONER

12**AUTOPSY REPORT**

No.

96-05446

WATKINS, KIMBERLY

I performed an autopsy on the body of



at the DEPARTMENT OF CORONER

Los Angeles, California

on JULY 22, 1996 @ 1030 HOURS

(Date)

(Time)

From the anatomic findings and pertinent history I ascribe the death to:

(A) **ACUTE COCAINE INTOXICATION**

DUE TO, OR AS A CONSEQUENCE OF:

(B)

DUE TO, OR AS A CONSEQUENCE OF

(C)

DUE TO, OR AS A CONSEQUENCE OF

(D)

OTHER CONDITIONS CONTRIBUTING BUT NOT RELATED TO THE IMMEDIATE CAUSE OF DEATH:

Anatomical Summary:

- I. Wounds consistent with taser wounds, dorsum right wrist and left anterior thigh.
- II. Obesity, moderate.
- III. Contusion, dorsum, second left finger.
- IV. Abrasion, right lateral lower leg.
- V. Stromal hyperplasia of ovaries.

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DEPARTMENT OF CORONER

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AUTOPSY REPORT

No.

96-05446

WATKINS, KIMBERLY

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COMMENT:

The cause of death is acute cocaine intoxication. The Police report indicates the decedent rammed the wall at one and drove at high speed and crashed into a car at another restaurant on 7/20/96 in Pomona. She reportedly exhibited irrational behavior and police were called. At the second restaurant, the decedent became belligerent and resisted attempts at restraint. The decedent was tasered, handcuffed, and legs were restrained before transport to the Pomona Valley Hospital Medical Center. The decedent was conscious and responsive during transport and in the early part of her arrival at the hospital. After arrival at the hospital, the decedent became unresponsive and was thought to have cardiac arrest. The decedent was pronounced dead at 1638 hours on 7/20/96. The autopsy reveals no gross cause of death. Taser wounds of the right wrist and left anterior thigh were noted, plus nonfatal injuries of the body. A complete toxicologic screen reveals a high level of cocaine and cocaethylene. An undetermined amount of cocaine is converted to the metabolite benzoylecgonine, postmortem. Cocaine is capable of producing fatal cardiac arrhythmia. The tasing, restraining procedures and Desipramine in my opinion played no role in the decedent's death. The manner of death is accidental.

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The autopsy is concluded at 1230 hours on July 22, 1996.

LEE E. BOCKHACKER, M.D.
DEPUTY MEDICAL EXAMINER

DATE

Crantigan
for Dr. Bockhacker 2-5-97

LEB:rs:c
T-11/25/96