

The brutal society

The stun belt: Torture at the push of a button

By Elisa Brehm
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“I woke up a short time later to very intense shocking pain running through my body. This electrical current was so intense that I thought that I was actually dying. I had not been causing any trouble, I was belly chained, shackled, seat belted in, and there was a fence between the officers and me, so there was absolutely no reason for them to be using this device on me... I think they shocked me a second time while I was still in the van. When we arrived, I was unloaded from the van and taken to a holding cell.... Once I was in the cell, several officers came into the cell and again I was shocked by the stun belt. This electrical blast knocked me to the floor, and I could hear the officers laughing and making jokes.”—testimony of an inmate as he was transported in a prison van to a mental health unit

This testimony is included in a chilling report compiled by Amnesty International. The report is not about the practices of some “rogue” state demonized by the American political establishment and media. It is about the United States. The testimony quoted above is from Craig Shelton, an inmate in Hutchinson Correctional Facility, a Department of Corrections prison in Reno County, Kansas.

The report, released on June 8, documents the growing use on prisoners of electro-shock stun equipment which discharges excruciating pain at the push of a button. The Amnesty International report names more than 130 US jurisdictions believed to have one such device, a stun belt, that is secured to a person's waist.

According to the report, “The USA's growing use of high-tech stun weapons dangerously blurs the line between torture and legitimate prisoner control techniques. The use of electro-shock stun technology in law enforcement raises concern for the protection of human rights—not surprisingly, given that electricity has

long been one of the favoured tools of the world's torturers.”

That the use of the stun belt is a form of torture can be ascertained from a description of its effects on the unfortunate victim. The stun belt, or R.E.A.C.T. (Remote Electronically Activated Controlled Technology) shocks its wearer for eight seconds with 50,000 volts of power. Two metal prongs, positioned above the left kidney, to maximize pain, leave welts that can take up to six months to heal. The painful blast knocks most of its victims to the floor, where they shake uncontrollably and remain incapacitated for as long as 15 minutes. Once the belt is activated, it cannot be turned off, even if its activation is accidental.

The use of the device can also have potentially deadly effects. According to a study by the British Forensic Service, electronic devices similar to the belt may cause heart attack, ventricular fibrillation, or arrhythmia, and may set off an adverse reaction in people with epilepsy.

There have been no medical studies of the effects of the belts on humans. One of the manufacturers of the equipment, Stun Tech Inc., located in Cleveland, Ohio, promotes its gruesome product in an advertising brochure, that cites “safety” tests by a doctor in Nebraska, who tested the device on anaesthetized pigs.

According to the Amnesty International document, the use of the stun belt, even when not activated, constitutes “cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment or punishment as outlawed under international law.” The threat alone that a severe shock can be administered at any moment resulting in the humiliating loss of control of bodily functions, makes this an instrument of terror as well as torture. Stun Tech concurs, “After all if you are wearing a contraption around your waist that by the mere push of a button in someone else's hand, could

make you defecate or urinate yourself, what would you do from the psychological standpoint?"

Proponents of the stun belt, including the federal government, say that it is worn only by the highest risk inmates for maximum security. But evidence is emerging that its use is becoming routine. On April 8, 1999, defendant Michael Leon Bell appeared in a California courtroom in a wheelchair, his wrists and ankles shackled, and wearing a stun belt. Bell had broken down emotionally when his mother, testifying on his behalf, was asked about the fact that her son was facing a possible death sentence. Testifying for the defense, a neuropsychologist stated that Bell, 28, suffered from a number of mental problems, including a brain disorder, which made it difficult for him to control his emotions. On April 19, the jury recommended that Michael Bell be sentenced to death.

Children who are tried as adults are not exempt from being made to wear the stun belt. In June 1997 Clark Krueger, a 17 year old, became the first inmate in the US to wear the belt on a prison work crew. Although sentenced as an adult he was still subject to anti-smoking rules for minors at the Fox Lake medium security prison in Wisconsin. His smoking earned him time in solitary confinement or on the work crew. He opted for the work crew and wore the stun belt as well as leg restraints.

Jason Halda and Michael Watts, accused of killing a local police officer in Manitowoc, Wisconsin in September 1998, were made to wear stun belts during pre-trial proceedings when both defendants were 17 years old. Each wore one throughout his trial. At his sentencing on April 7, 1999, Jason Halda, who has learning difficulties, was shackled and wearing a stun belt. He was sentenced to life imprisonment without parole, in violation of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child.

The report also cites several cases of the device being used against prisoners who are mentally ill. Amnesty International expressed particular concern that the stun belts are routinely used on inmates from the segregated HIV/AIDS unit which is housed in the Old Parish Prison, the maximum security facility in New Orleans, Louisiana. These inmates are required to sign a waiver consenting to the use of the stun belt on them or they will not be taken to the clinic for treatment they need on a regular basis.

Since 1980 the combined prison population in the US has more than tripled and is now nearing 2 million. Even though prison construction is one of the fastest growing industries, the expansion has not kept up with the growing numbers of incarcerations. Producers of the electro-shock devices market the use of their products as a cost-cutting measure since it permits the elimination of staff. Private companies, such as CCA (Corrections Corporation of America), involved in the rapidly growing incarceration business, have an even stronger incentive in cutting costs to increase profits.

The United States is one of only two countries known to Amnesty International to be using the stun belt.

In March of this year the human rights organization confirmed that the US supplied South Africa with stun belts; the belts are being used in a maximum security prison in Pretoria during the transport of prisoners to court.

The Amnesty International report case be accessed at: <http://www.amnesty.org/ailib/aipub/1999/AMR/25105499.htm#Footref40>

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