

Torture technology - a booming industry?

Steve Wright outlines the recently introduced European Union controls on torture equipment and assesses whether they are adequate to control current developments in military technology

Europe is justifiably proud of its democratic instruments. Yet it is astonishing that civilised western countries still have not completely stopped corporate bodies selling torture technologies. And even when a decision is made in principle to outlaw equipment of abuse, official foot-dragging still enables business as usual. Why did the European Commission take from January 2003 until last summer to agree measures controlling technologies which facilitate execution, torture and human rights abuse? Perhaps it was fear of centralised Brussels controls? Strong lobbying by non-governmental organisations pressured the EU's Council of Ministers to belatedly approve diluted new export controls. Death penalty equipment and technologies that can be solely used for torture will be banned. But earlier drafts which gave the Commission ultimate oversight were stripped out of the final agreement. Policing of these regulations and whether some are banned or simply "controlled" will now be at member states' discretion¹.

The brutal trade in leg shackles, guillotines, gas chambers, hanging ropes, gallows and electronic shock prods isn't worth much monetarily. Mediaeval restraints such as leg-irons are made by just eight European companies - at least one serviced the first slave trades. On moral grounds the need for control is a "no brainer". 50,000 volt pulsed shock prods symbolise human rights abuse - Amnesty International calls them the "universal tool of the torturer".

Then UN Special Rapporteur on Torture, Theo Van Boeven, in his final report identified 15 European companies manufacturing electro-shock weapons but said a total of 255 were involved in their manufacture, brokerage and distribution². He was disappointed that rewritten regulations will not now cover brokering deals via "third countries" - the weakest link will permit business as usual - especially if trade is regulated not banned.

Why does this matter? Well Amnesty International's files are replete with cases involving push-button torture. Meanwhile, a second generation of incapacitating technology is on the horizon: hi-tech, lucrative and capable of industrialising repression.

Events at Guantanamo Bay and Abu Ghraib reveal a willingness to reverse the democratic consensus of more civilised nations and re-introduce torture as a government service. The USA will fight its "War against Terror", with new doctrines of "full spectrum dominance", using both novel strategies (such as "layered defence" - rheostatic controlled violence from maiming, to full scale "tuneable lethality") and new technologies (including allegedly "harmless" non-lethal weapons using directed energy systems, chemical and biological agents, robotics, acoustic waves, microwave, laser and unmanned aerial vehicles). In other words, it is a turkey-shoot with paralysed targets.

The International Red Cross has severe reservations about the use of rheostatic weapons such as the Vehicle Mounted Area Denial System (VMAD) which heats people up to an unbearable 140°F. The device is meant to be self limiting since victims are expected to move away from the pain beam - but would fleeing refugees do so if they were being chased by armed hit squads? Who would treat them to avoid post-traumatic stress?

David Hambling's features in *New Scientist* questioned the future role, function and ethics of weapons such as wireless tasers, which can project lightning at crowds by spraying them with a conductive plasma³. Hambling found other variants including the Xtreme Alternative Defense System's Close Quarters Shock rifle which projects ionised gas⁴, and a star wars variant made by Mission Research Corporation (MRC) which uses lasers to create Pulsed Energy Projectiles (PEP) that ionise a target's clothing and sweat⁵. Already hints of strategy have emerged in US Department of Defense contracts wishing to use VMAD and the PEP together: VMAD for general pain induction to target crowds and PEP to "ablate" serious ring leaders⁶. Human testing is proceeding and over 900 volunteers have been microwaved so far. Steps have already been announced by the US Air Force Research Laboratory to take some of this mass pain technology airborne⁷.

After the September 11 attacks, big dollar budgets became available for this weaponry (e.g. \$3.2 billion awarded to MRC in 2004) and some of the contracts are specifying both lethal and non-lethal applications. The work has become institutionalised and time-lined with rapid innovation. At last month's FPED show inside Quantico (HQ of the joint non-lethal weapons directorate), victim-activated taser landmines were on show. These are capable of shooting darts

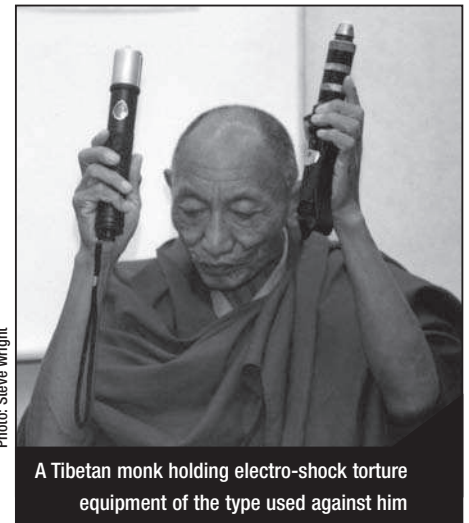


Photo: Steve Wright

A Tibetan monk holding electro-shock torture equipment of the type used against him

carrying 50,000 volts to paralyse targets for up to an hour. Metalstorm were also at the show, grant-funded by US Defense Advanced Research Projects Agency after a successful test of their mortar system in March 2005. Metalstorm's systems are electronically fired and claim astonishing rates of fire - hundreds of thousands of rounds per minute, which can pixelate an area with "non-lethal" rounds. Such technologies do not violate the UN Landmine Treaty since they can be triggered by cameras on satellites containing a virtual mine field.

The European Commission regulations are necessary, but insufficient to address innovation in systems designed to induce compliance via pain. No one calls these products torture technologies. Instead we have jaw-cracking Orwellian euphemisms e.g. "electromuscular disruption technology"⁸. If we can't control the grisly mediaeval stuff, then all of us could face algorithmic, advanced, mass human pain-inducing or rendering systems at borders or on the streets during future military operations other than war. Will these weapons really be legal and non-lethal? Ask a lawyer to calculate what the charges would be for firing specific devices at a senior politician. Most would plump for "attempted murder" rather than GBH!

Before resigning last year, the UN Special Rapporteur expressed his concern that new products - whose use in practice had revealed a substantial risk of abuse or unwarranted injury - were being marketed internationally. He suggested that the "effects of these products should have been subject to rigorous inquiries by medical, scientific and law enforcement experts who are fully independent of the

Photo: Steve Wright



Chinese officer with electro-shock baton
in Tiananmen Square

manufacturers, traders and law enforcement agencies promoting them, and whose proceedings and conclusions are transparent and subject to peer review in public scientific literature"⁹.

This proposal is far from current practice. Indeed delegates at the Non-lethal Defence IV (March 2005)¹⁰ conference were advised by a representative from the Office of the Assistant Secretary of Defence for Public Affairs to really "go after" their critics not inform them¹¹. Indeed there is a supersensitivity about informed challenges to the ethics of such systems.

One key proponent of advanced paralysing technologies at a recent conference could not help himself reacting angrily to *New Scientist's* March editorial on new pain weapons and torture¹². Thumping the podium with a rolled up copy of *New Scientist*, he fatuously suggested that you could use it to hurt people or use it as a torture instrument with the addition of Vaseline. "Maybe what we should do is ban *New Scientist*?"¹³

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Older colonial torture technologies depended on techniques to produce bespoke torture on a one-to-one or many-to-one basis. Advanced pain-inducing technologies are capable of paralysing in a one-to-many fashion and potentially industrialise torture by undermining the right to maim-free protest.

The UN Special Rapporteur expressed his foreboding that "A number of countries are developing equipment for the purpose of crowd control by law

enforcement. This equipment employs a range of new technologies, and is referred to as 'non-lethal weapons', including devices which employ high decibel sounds and microwaves... these new technologies have the potential to be used for torture and ill-treatment, including collective punishment if abused. Therefore, thorough research into their effects on people, stringent training and restrictions on their transfer need to be considered"¹⁴.

Alas, we are already beyond the prototype stages with some victim-activated systems. Some are implemented by non-human algorithms to create human-rights-free area denial zones, while others are "invisible" weapons designed to achieve group paralysis, produce compliance through pain or deny entire zones through mass immobilisation. The lessons of the Moscow Theatre siege, where the ill-prepared use of a fentanyl-derivative aerosol killed over 118 hostages, have not been learned. At the 3rd Non-lethal Weapons Symposium in Germany last May, Czech medics from an Institute for Clinical and Experimental Medicine advocated using their skills as anaesthetists to build new "calmative" weapons¹⁵. It would be comforting but futile to believe that the Pugwash proposal for an ethical code for scientists would prevent such scientific irresponsibility. Nor will the recent Royal Society's welcome call for global co-operation to prevent misuse of science through codes of conduct be sufficient. Ideally scientists should be subject to professional sanction and prosecution if they knowingly create tools of punishment which can violate international standards of human rights. Currently such scientists are given fat contracts.

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