

30 Aug 07

Civil Liberties Australia 

Police stun gun report two years late, sanitised

ACT Policing released a report on its Taser X26 stun gun trial on 30 August 2007, two years late, sanitized and incomplete, Civil Liberties Australia says.

The report shows that stun guns have been unholstered 26 times, or about once a month, and used to stun people about 40 per cent of occasions.

“What is really worrying is that even the police’s own ‘bare bones’ report shows police are using stun guns on people captive in cells and paddy wagons,” CLA’s CEO Bill Rowlings said.

“Based on overseas experience, there will almost certainly be people seriously injured in Australia, and someone will die, after being stunned by the 50,000 volt ‘electrical incapacitant’ weapon.”

At the rate of use by ACT Policing and the AFP, a death is likely in Australia within the next four years: US reports indicate a death rate after stun gun use by police forces of about 3 in 200 cases, he said.

The ACT stun gun trial was announced in December 2004 for a six-month period, after which a report was to be produced: the then-ACT Police Minister, Mr John Hargreaves, said he would make the report public.

Two years late, in August 2007, the report says: “On 15 June 2006 the AFP Operational Safety Committee approved the Taser X26 as a less than lethal use of force option.”

This is stunning arrogance, an extraordinary slap in the face for the public, by the AFP, Mr Rowlings said.

“The AFP and ACT Policing have stayed ‘mum’ for 14 months, not releasing the report, after they fully approved stun guns for use in the ACT and nationally,” he said.

“It’s a pretty clear indication that police treat the people of the ACT and Australia with contempt. A report initially due in June 2005 is released in August 2007, and that’s more than a year after the police have made up their minds for full national use of the weapon without making the report public.

“Even then, the report is totally unsatisfactory. There is no information on the reactions of the dozen or so people stunned by the weapons. Their health immediately after the stunning, and subsequently, is entirely missing from the report.

“There has been no opportunity for independent health or civil liberties groups to interview the people stunned, to find out what the story is from the other side,” Mr Rowlings said.

In the trial period, police stunned people using either the direct contact mode, with the weapon right next to their clothing, or after twin darts were fired from some metres away into skin or clothing so a 50,000 volt charge could run through the electric circuit for up to

about five seconds.

“Overseas, hundreds of people have died from police use of these weapons,” Mr Rowlings said.

“They affect some people more than others, and there’s no way of knowing who will suffer an unexpectedly extreme reaction.

“People who appear to be at risk are those with hidden heart problems, or on drugs or some types of medication, or people in extremely stressed situations – people in these categories have suffered an extreme reaction and died.

“There have been no proper studies anywhere in the world as to the safety of these weapons, and of who is specially at risk. There is a robust, two-year study under way in the United States. CLA has urged police in Australia to not use stun guns until the results of this study are made known.

“But they have ignored the plea; someone is certain to die in Australia through police use of stun guns,” he said.

It was never made clear whether the AFP trial was just for ACT Policing or was, in fact, a national trial for AFP use of stun guns. Even now, after the report has been handed down, that fact is still not clear.

The report says: “The trial and subsequent operational use of the Taser in ACT Policing demonstrates that it can be a viable addition to the less than lethal options available to police.”

It does not specify whether this localised trial is meant to vindicate nationwide use of the weapon by all AFP officers. In fact, the weapons are likely to be in front-line use during APEC by many dozens of police from special response groups drawn from throughout Australia, and by special forces troops.

It would not surprise if these were serious injuries, or even a fatality, during APEC.

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Copy of the police report: http://www.jcs.act.gov.au/eLibrary/act_community_policing.html

- *Bill Rowlings, CEO of CLA, has studied use of stun guns worldwide since 2004.*