

Six new deaths spark 'ban the Taser' demands in U.S.

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The Canadian Press

WASHINGTON (Nov 27, 2007)

When Florida student Andrew Meyer was stunned with a Taser gun this fall at a campus session with Senator John Kerry, the dramatic video footage made all the networks.

And it re-ignited debate in the United States about the use and dangers of the brand-name guns that zap people with high-voltage electric shocks.

Now, with the deaths of four Americans who were tased in the last 10 days, there are new demands to ban them.

All told, there have been six deaths in the United States since Robert Dziekanski died last month at Vancouver Airport in a highly contentious case that has provoked a national debate about the weapons in Canada.

That concern is mirrored south of the border.

"People are paying attention," said Jason Disterhoft at Amnesty International U.S.A. "It seems like people are worried and rightly so."

If the issue is newly front and centre for U.S. government officials, rights groups and cops, it actually has been prominent here for the last few years.

Amnesty has consistently raised concern about the use of Tasers in routine law enforcement situations or as a weapon of first resort.

The group has been calling on police departments to suspend use of Tasers or at least limit them to situations involving the threat of death or serious injury.

Tasing someone who is not violent and poses no threat to himself or others constitutes cruel, inhuman and degrading treatment, says Amnesty.

The United Nations Committee Against Torture singled out Tasers at a Geneva conference last Friday, agreeing that the most popular model caused so much pain that using it "constituted a form of torture."

Meyer, for instance, was still posing questions to Kerry after his time ran out and he resisted attempts by university police to remove him. After yelling out: "Don't tase me, bro," he got a blast from the stun gun as he lay on the ground, with one arm handcuffed.

Two of the policemen were placed on paid administrative leave and Meyer agreed to 18 months of probation to avoid criminal charges of resisting arrest.

In Utah, an officer recently tased a driver who refused to sign a speeding ticket.

A patrol car's dashboard camera caught it on tape and the incident became popular on YouTube. The officer is under investigation, accused of being too quick to pull out the Taser.

Other recent U.S. cases have been far more grave, including the death Nov. 18 of 20-year-old Jarrel Grey, who died in Frederick, Md., after a sheriff's deputy tried to break up a late-night brawl.

Black leaders are calling for a ban on Tasers, at least until there's a clear policy on how they're used by cops.

That's something police want as well, saying it's not right to send officers out to make split-second decisions without proper guidelines and training.

Those vary significantly across the country among some 12,000 police departments that use Tasers.

"My sense is there is no cogent policy nationwide," said Rich Roberts at the International Union of Police Associations in Sarasota, Fla., which is developing a research project on Tasers.

"I'm afraid the same thing may apply to training. My fear is too many departments may be (explaining) the technology and that's it."

What cops need to know, said Roberts, is exactly where the Taser belongs in the "force continuum," so it will be used appropriately.

But it should "absolutely" be part of the police arsenal, along with pepper spray, batons and guns, he said.

Since it isn't classified as a firearm, it's exempt from federal firearms requirement and regulations.

There's still no agreement in the United States on whether Tasers, which release 50,000 volts of electricity, can actually kill or whether the victims had pre-existing conditions.

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