

Tapes show O.C. deputies using Tasers on restrained inmates

The Orange County Register

Videotapes showing Orange County sheriff's deputies repeatedly using Tasers on restrained inmates have added to the controversy over a jail system already being investigated for its treatment of inmates.

Two videotapes obtained from lawyers suing the county for excessive force show deputies wrenching the arms of inmates and using Tasers on defendants already on their bellies or strapped to a chair.

Sheriff's policy allows the use of stun guns on people who may already be restrained "in some fashion" because the weapon "causes no permanent or serious injury."

Some watchdog groups call that torture.

"If the policy is: You can inflict pain on somebody you already control, then this is a horrible policy," said Dalia Hashad, director of Amnesty International's USA Program.

Amnesty International has tracked 300 deaths since July 2001 that followed the use of a Taser, although none has been directly attributed to the weapon. Hashad said more study is needed on the safety of the Taser, which discharges 50,000 volts into the subject.

The Orange County Sheriff's Department and the Association of Orange County Deputy Sheriffs declined to comment on the videos.

But Mike Durant, vice president of the Peace Officers Research Association of California, said videos showing use of force in jails can often be misleading.

"There's more information to the small piece of video than you see in most cases. A lot of times, they're dealing with people who are under the influence of a controlled substance, who are not in their right minds or know what actions they are doing," Durant said.

"And what's oftentimes overlooked is that not only are the officers trying to protect themselves but (also) the violent and unruly inmate. ? In 22 years of law enforcement, I have yet to meet any custody officer who is out looking for a confrontation."

The release of the videos comes as a special grand jury is wrapping up its investigation into the beating death of an inmate at the Theo Lacy Facility in 2006. An inmate said a deputy told a group of inmates that the man was a child molester, inviting the beating.

The new video shows deputies mobbing Liza Munoz, who was arrested Sept. 3, 2004, on suspicion of drug possession after officers found a bottle of Vicodin with another person's name.

The deputies' reports say Munoz became unruly during the booking process and refused to follow directions. The deputies applied "wristlocks" to Munoz and took her to the ground, where she kept struggling, the reports say. Munoz was then stunned with a Taser three times on her back, officials said.

However, the video shows Munoz outmuscled by deputies and screaming. Her arms are pulled high above her back, and she appears subdued by the time the Taser is applied. Part of the action is not covered by the hand-held camera, which shifts to a shot of the empty floor and then appears to be turned off and on.

According to department literature, the Taser aims to affect the subject's central nervous system, causing muscle contractions that allow a person to be subdued. But one deputy can be heard threatening Munoz with the pain of the Taser. Amnesty International says "pain compliance" is an improper use of the weapon.

"They're using torture as a means of getting people to do what they want," said attorney Jerry Steering, who is representing Munoz in her lawsuit.

In another case, deputies swarmed Matthew Ryan Fleuret, 24, at the men's jail on March 18, 2006, after his arrest in a bar fight. Video shows several deputies taking the 160-pound man to the ground, where one jailer drops his knee onto Fleuret's head. The same deputy also wrests Fleuret's arms high above his back and refuses a supervisor's suggestion to let go of Fleuret's arms.

Deputies called Fleuret "uncooperative and intoxicated." They say Fleuret pushed his way out of a cell a movement caught on the tape. The video also shows Fleuret is shocked several times his lawyer says 11. Fleuret was shocked twice after he was strapped to a restraining chair, a "spit mask" over his face.

"There are portions (of the video) that show my client was resisting, but there's a reason for it. He was scared to death," said Stephen Bernard, a Los Angeles attorney representing Fleuret in his federal lawsuit.

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