

Victorian Police Plan to Use Chemical Weapons

The first week of 1994 saw the tragic shooting of two people by Victoria police. In both situations, police claimed they were threatened with either a knife or a sword, and fired multiple shots, to defend themselves. The shootings raise serious questions as to how police respond to people suffering from psychiatric disorders, as well as concerns about the level of force used by police in response to perceived threats.

The following week saw police announce that in response to the shootings, they were considering a large scale programme of rearmament. In particular, they announced that they were considering the introduction of capsicum spray gas and extendible steel batons. One senior policeman was quoted as saying "at present, detectives have no mid-range defence options between the fist and the gun".

The proposed introduction of a disabling capsicum spray has caused particular concern. Senior police have used the two recent shootings as a justification for the introduction of a "mid range" weapon. However, it has been revealed that police have been considering the introduction of the spray gas for 12 months, including looking at its use overseas, and testing the spray on police recruits at the Police Training Academy. Linking the introduction of the spray to the two most recent shootings could easily be seen as a cynical public relations exercise.

Interestingly, after the two most recent fatal police shootings in Victoria, which occurred within 36 hours of each other in March, police were quick to point out that had the spray been available for use in those situations, it would not have been used, and police action in shooting at the main body mass of the suspects was appropriate in the circumstances.

Most importantly, therefore, the proposal to introduce capsicum spray needs to be seen as the introduction of an additional police weapon. Police have totally ruled out the option of the spray replacing firearms.

In late January, senior police announced that they were formulating guidelines for the introduction of capsicum gas on a trial six month period. This is in spite of the fact that the gas has been shown to have serious, and potentially fatal medical side effects. Assistant Commissioner for Training, Bill Robertson, has already acknowledged some of the effects the gas would have on its victims, saying "it has an effect on the eyes and respiratory system, making it extremely effective in retarding movement".

Little information has been made available to the public on the results of police tests of the gas, or the training and use guidelines. When such information was sought under the Freedom of Information legislation, access to the relevant documents was denied, with police claiming that "release of the information was contrary to the public interest".

The effects of the gas seem to be even more serious, than indicated by Assistant Commissioner Robertson. On application to the skin, the gas can cause changes in the nerve responses, creating intense pain, and/or numbness. There is also evidence that it can cause permanent nerve cell damage. Burning, blistering and dermatitis have been known to be caused by the gas, and it would seem that the substance is particularly dangerous for people with skin disorders.

The gas is also dangerous for people suffering from respiratory problems such as asthma. Australia has one of the highest rates of asthma in the world. The use of capsicum gas on an asthmatic may lead to serious or fatal consequences. In the USA, there have already been reported deaths where police used the spray on people with respiratory disorders.

Sensitive organs (for example, eyes, nose, throat, genitalia) can be permanently damaged if exposed to the gas. In addition, there is evidence to suggest that the gas may cause forms of cancer, and can lead to potentially serious problems with pregnant women.

This development in police armoury needs to be placed in the context of what has developed in police issues in Victoria over the last 18 months. In that time we have seen a massive increase in the number of police personnel on the street. The State Government has increased police powers to demand names and addresses from citizens and take fingerprints. There has been a marked increase in the force used by police to break up political demonstrations, as is borne out by the baton charge at Richmond Secondary School in December, 1993, and the use of "pressure point" holds on forest demonstrators in February. At the same time, there have been no changes to the procedure for making complaints against police — a procedure which has received widespread criticism from Community Legal Centres as being inadequate, lacking perceived independence and certainly lacking in public confidence.

It is into this climate that police are proposing to introduce a new weapon, in addition to their existing weapons — a weapon that appears to contravene Article 1 of the *International Biological Weapons Convention*, of which Australia is a signatory. It has already been announced that the spray will be introduced on a trial basis in three city and suburban police stations in Melbourne (City Watchhouse, Springvale and St Albans) and one country station (Morwell).¹

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1 If you are concerned about the proposal to introduce capsicum gas as a police weapon, write to the Coalition Against Repressive Police Equipment and Training (CARPET), GPO Box 695E, Melbourne, VIC, 3001.