TEARGAS CAUSES MORE THAN TEARS.

RUBBER BULLETS ARE NO TOYS

Teargas and rubber bullets are often claimed by police to be 'safe' methods of crowd control. However, the way in which they are being used by the South African Police makes them anything but safe. In this article, Clifford Goldsmith looks at the ways in which teargas and rubber bullets affect people.

Teargas

The early form of teargas

Gases that cause the eyes to tear have been used in warfare and by police forces for many years. The ingredients of the gas have been changed over the years, because some of them affected people's health very badly. In some cases, the early form of the gas caused death. The early form of teargas also contained elements which are known to cause cancer.

Teargas - a 'safe' chemical?

Since the early days of teargas, the composition of teargas has changed.

Nevertheless, armies and police forces think that it is a 'safer' way to control crowds.

Teargas is 'safe' only under very specific conditions, that is, when it is used outdoors and in very low concentrations and on men weighing over 70 kilograms. Often, however, the gas is used in high concentrations. In those cases, it can cause illness and even death. It is horrifying to know that there are no international standards or codes for the use of such weapons.

Teargas was first produced in South Africa in 1963. The police recently claimed that the mixture used by them is the 'safest' form. But they did not say exactly how it is produced, what exactly it consists of, and what

concentration of gas is contained in each exploding cannister. It is also clear that the police are not using teargas only under the conditions for which it has been shown to be safe. There are reports of cannisters being thrown into homes, churches, meeting halls, and even into a clinic. Indoors the concentration can very quickly reach toxic levels. In rainy weather, the gas stays in the air longer.

Among those people exposed to teargas are elderly people, sick people, pregnant women,or very young children.

Many of these people cannot get themselves out of a closed space. They are therefore likely to be exposed to a concentrated form of teargas for longer periods. These people, therefore, are at greater risk.

The effects of teargas

The minor effects of teargas include itching, burning, and tearing of the eyes, irritation of the eyes caused by bright lights, twitching of the eyelids, a watery discharge and irritation of the mouth with a lot of spit forming in the mouth. Chest pain and coughing may also occur. If people are exposed to teargas for a longer time, they may get nausea, vomiting, and headaches. All of these reactions to teargas usually disappear after thirty minutes of reaching fresh air.

If people are exposed to high concentrations of tearges for a long time, they may get a skin rash. This skin disease gets worse, and people may experience blistering, an inflammation of the inside of the lungs (alveolitis and pulmonary oedema), and damage to organs like the liver and kidneys. Even death may occur. Teargas can kill because it disturbs certain chemical substances in the body. It can damage the lungs. A person who gets a lung or skin infection may die from these after being attacked with teargas.

It is therefore not teargas itself, but the way in which the South African Police use it, that makes this gas so dangerous. The use of teargas by the South African Police should be condemned in the strongest possible terms.

Rubber Bullets

Rubber bullets are not toys

The term 'rubber bullet' makes this type of bullet sound like something harmless or toy-like. Nothing could be further from the truth. The name, however, is a very convenient one for the police and army.

The bullet is a solid rubber cylinder. The rubber is hardened and cannot be squeezed together in your hand. It is 10 centimeters long and has a diameter of 3,5 centimeters. It is fired from the barrel of a hand rifle similar to that of a 'snort neus'.

Whether or not this bullet can cause bad injuries, depends on certain factors:

- the distance between the person who shoots and the victim
- the angle at which the bullet touches the victim and the edge of the bullet touching the victim
- the part of the body which the bullet hits, for instance the head, the eye, etc.
- the victim's general condition and the condition of his/her skin. (In elderly people, the skin is not so elastic any more and more damage can be done.)

The effects of rubber bullets

The effects of 'rubber' bullets have never been fully studied. But people who observed them say that thay can be dangerous, especially when they are fired at close range. Rubber bullets cause blunt injuries. Blunt injuries include:

- soft tissue injury, for example bruising

- brain injury - ranging from concussion, with or without memory loss, to bleeding inside the brain

- injury to bones and joints, for instance bleeding into a knee which can lead to permanent joint stiffness

- blunt abdominal injury - a very dangerous problem. Any organ in the abdomen can be damaged. But most commonly, the kidneys, the spleen, and the bladder may be damaged.

- fractures

- eye injuries - 'squash' injury. This can lead to bleeding inside the front or back parts of the eye.

- damage to teeth

- tearing of the skin

- psychological distress

As in the case with teargas, so, too, with rubber bullets, the effects are entirely dependent on the attitudes of the police and army using them. We need to document the injuries caused these rubber bullets. We need to find out from people what parts of their bodies were injured, and from what range the bullet was fired. This kind of information could be a powerful tool in showing the actions of the police and army for what they are.

Critical Health would like to hear from people who have suffered injuries after being shot with 'rubber' bullets. We would also like to hear from doctors who have examined people who have been shot. We will keep your name secret.