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Lasers used on Iraqi drivers who won't stop

Military says 'optical incapacitation' aims to prevent checkpoint deaths

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B.E. Meyers

B.E. Meyers, the company that makes a laser used by U.S. troops in Iraq, said this photo shows the green beam from 330 yards away.

msnbc.com staff and news service reports
updated 11:49 a.m. PT, Thurs., May 18, 2006

WASHINGTON - The U.S. military has given troops in Iraq a laser device to temporarily incapacitate drivers who ignore warnings at checkpoints, the Pentagon acknowledged Thursday.

Army Lt. Col. Barry Venable, a Pentagon spokesman, defended its use as legal and said the devices were intended to prevent civilians from being shot.

"There have been numerous incidents that tragically have resulted in civilian deaths" in which drivers approaching U.S. military checkpoints have failed to heed warnings from troops, who in some cases have opened fire, he said.

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The U.S. military is fitting some M-4 rifles used by U.S. forces in Iraq with a tube-shaped device that is about 10 1/2 inches long that shines a green laser beam.

Venable stressed that the devices do not cause permanent blindness. "They don't blind people. It's like shining a big light in your eyes," Venable said. "I

think the term is optical incapacitation -- dazzlers as opposed to something that will blind you."

"These are not illegal weapons. And in fact, calling them weapons would be a misnomer," Venable said. "They are a warning device intended to be inserted into the escalation-of-force process to minimize unnecessary casualties. You could call it a nonlethal weapon if you must call it a weapon."

"We haven't developed, acquired or fielded any blinding laser weapons that are designed to cause permanent blindness," Venable added.

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Attempt to stem checkpoint violence

Venable said he did not know how widespread the usage of the devices was in Iraq. The Los Angeles Times on Thursday first reported the use of the laser.

The Times quoted Lt. Col. Richard Smith, deputy director of the Joint NonLethal Weapons Directorate at the Pentagon, as saying the laser marked an important milestone for nonlethal devices.

"This is really the first time the visually overwhelming devices have actually been used," Smith said. "This was based off needs of war fighters and commanders in the field. They have several incidents a day where a vehicle is coming at a group of soldiers ... These dazzlers can reach out a couple hundred meters and give soldiers added security."

In the three-year-old war, violence at military checkpoints has been commonplace, with American forces sometimes opening fire on cars and trucks that ignore warnings to stop or come too close. Insurgents often have attacked troops at checkpoints, sometimes with car bombs. But civilians also have been shot in incidents that resulted from apparent misunderstandings.

The laser is made by B.E. Meyers & Co. of Redmond, Wash.

David Shannon, the company's product development director, told MSNBC.com that at a distance of 110 yards, the beam widens to cover an area about 16 inches in diameter.

At that range, Shannon said, "it's pretty stinking bright and you're not liking it."

The beam can be fixed or set to pulse at two different rates and can be seen from more than two miles. From 330 yards and closer, Shannon said, it is powerful enough to be "a strong deterrent."

"It gets brighter and brighter as you approach it," and soldiers have been trained not to use it within 75 yards, at which point "it would cause eye damage," he added.

Seeing stars for several minutes

The Times cited a recent demonstration at the U.S. military headquarters at Camp Victory near Baghdad during which a soldier fired the beam across an indoor hallway. "Even indirect exposure to the light as it bounced off the white marble floor left observers seeing stars for several minutes afterward," the Times reported.

Matthew Murphy, who handles sales for the company, told the Times that the effect is "almost like looking in the sun. They are going to know they are targeted and more likely than not they are going to stop."

Neither the company nor the military would say how much the laser units cost.


The Times reported that Army Sgt. Brendan Woolworth was one of the first

to try the laser in Iraq. An Iraqi driver got too close and failed to heed shouts to stop, he said, and that's when he directed a pulsing beam at the car's windshield.

"He pulled off to the side of the road and stopped," the Times quoted Woolworth as saying. "He got the message. It looked like he just hadn't been paying attention."

Reuters and MSNBC.com's Miguel Llanos contributed to this report.

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