

LESS LETHAL WEAPONS:

Water Cannons

What are they and how can they be used lawfully?

Water cannons are frequently used by police forces around the world in the context of public assemblies and may be used to disperse a crowd in the case of widespread violence against persons that cannot be contained otherwise.

HOW DO WATER CANNONS WORK?

These are high-pressure pumping systems designed to shoot jets of water at people. Pressure can vary from low (to only soak a person – “rain shower” mode) to high pressure aimed at pushing people through the power of the jet. They can also be used to fire small volumes (“slugs” or “bullets”) of water. Sometimes the police use them with additives such as marker dye for later identification of people or chemical irritants.

EFFECTS & RISKS

Warranted effects

- Discomfort of being wet.
- Moderate pain.
- Minor bruises.

Unwarranted effects & risks

- ✗ Injuries sustained due to falling, slipping on wet ground or being knocked over by the water jet, being pushed into objects by the pressure of the spout, or being hit by loose objects that are propelled off the ground.
- ✗ If additives are mixed with the water: irritation of the skin, eyes or airways.
- ✗ Severe injuries, including death:
 - Head or eye injuries as a result of direct impact, including severe injuries and permanent loss of sight or even death as a result of skull or brain injuries.
 - Hypothermia or frostbite as a result of being soaked in cold weather conditions.

WHEN CAN WATER CANNONS BE USED LAWFULLY?

THRESHOLD AND PURPOSE

- ✓ In high pressure mode: Only in case of widespread violence against persons that cannot be addressed anymore by targeting violent individuals alone, and only to be used when people can disperse easily because the purpose is the dispersal of a crowd.
- ✓ “Rain shower”-mode: Exceptionally for the purpose of dispersal **only** if the dispersal as such complies with international human rights law and standards.

PROHIBITIONS

- ✗ In high pressure mode, when there is no or only isolated acts of violence, because of the high risk of affecting bystanders and peaceful protesters alike or to simply obtain compliance with a dispersal order.
- ✗ Against persons who have fallen on the ground or are unable to move.
- ✗ As a means of punishment.
- ✗ In particular cold temperatures when becoming wet is a serious health risk on its own.
- ✗ “Rain-shower”-mode: When there is no justification for dispersing, in particular when people legitimately exercise their right to freedom of peaceful assembly.

HOW CAN WATER CANNONS BE USED LAWFULLY?

Do's

- ✓ After a warning with sufficient time granted to comply with the order.
- ✓ Carefully controlled, from the correct distance and with the correct jet power as established to avoid too heavy an impact.

Don'ts

- ✗ Targeting the head.
- ✗ With excessive jet power in relation to the distance.
- ✗ Random firing in various directions.

WEAPONS TO BE PROHIBITED

- ✗ Water cannons from the fire brigade (not developed and tested for law enforcement purposes).
- ✗ With chemical irritants (uncontrollable exposure to the irritant increasing health risks) or marker dye (risk of stigmatization, harassment, arbitrary

✓ As soon as people are complying with the order (dispersing/stop the violence) the use of the weapon must stop.

✗ While advancing the vehicle recklessly.

arrest of uninvolved people) or heated water (to provoke pain).

WATER CANNONS AND PROTESTS



Peaceful assemblies must be facilitated:

✓ Deployment and use of a water cannon must be placed under the command and control of a senior commanding officer in charge of the overall situation to ensure safe and appropriate use.

✓ Police may use a water cannon in high-pressure mode **only in case of widespread violence** - not simply to disperse people or to overcome passive resistance against an order, such as people simply sitting on the ground.

- ✗ In “rain-shower”-mode never to be used when there is no justification for dispersing, in particular when people legitimately exercise their right to freedom of peaceful assembly.
- ✓ Particular care is required for the vehicle when advancing to avoid any accidents as a result of high speed or when people have fallen to the ground - as a result of the jet, because of the wet ground or when running away.

WATER CANNONS AND CHILDREN



The use of any weapon against children must be avoided!

Children are more likely to suffer greater injury and harm due to their thinner muscle mass, stronger pain, greater risk of slipping or falling, and risk of psychological trauma.

Instructions must include special precautions regarding children such as greater risk of hitting the head due to their smaller bodies.

INSTRUCTIONS AND TRAINING



Authorities must provide clear regulations, instructions and training on when and how to use water cannons properly. The use of a water cannon in jet-mode against peaceful protesters should be explicitly prohibited.

- ✓ Water cannons should only be introduced after a thorough review to determine if there is a legitimate operational need for their deployment which would comply with international human rights law and standards on the use of force.
- ✓ Water cannon vehicles, as all weapons used by police, should undergo rigorous, independent testing to ensure they are safe and appropriate for use in compliance with human rights laws and standards – for water cannon vehicles regarding the different levels of water pressure, targeting range and precision of the jet as well as the vehicle safety (regarding observability of the surroundings, speed and stopping distance). Any equipment with a significant risk of causing excessive or otherwise unwarranted injury or harm should not be used.
- ✓ Police officials operating water cannons should be instructed and trained on the appropriate distance and jet power, how to aim with the jet to avoid causing unnecessary or serious harm or unnecessarily affect bystanders, and how to drive the vehicle to avoid accidents.
- ✓ Only certified police officials should be authorized to operate a water cannon vehicle.
- ✓ Each use of a water cannon should be reported and law enforcement officials must be held accountable for any unlawful use.

MORE INFORMATION



- Amnesty's [Use of Force: Guidelines for Implementation of the UN Basic Principles on the Use of Force and Firearms by Law Enforcement Officials](#) and [Summary](#)
- [UN Basic Principles on the Use of Force and Firearms by Law Enforcement Officials](#)
- Amnesty's [Police and Human Rights resources website](#)

