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L.A. County sheriff to unveil device intended to curb inmate assaults

August 20, 2010 | 8:50 am

Los Angeles County Sheriff Lee Baca will unveil a new direct-energy device Friday that creates a burning sensation in its human targets and is being tested as a way to curtail inmate violence in jails. The assault intervention device is about as close as it gets to science fiction's Star Trek phaser. Baca will demonstrate it at 2 p.m. at the Pitchess Detention Center in Castaic.

The device uses millimeter waves that penetrate the skin to a depth of 1/64 of an inch, producing an intolerable heating sensation that causes the person targeted to instinctively flee or give up.

Officials say they know it works because they've used it on themselves.

"It gets instantly hot and then instantly cools down," said sheriff's spokesman Steve Whitmore, who was among the test subjects at sheriff's headquarters.

The device developed by Raytheon is being assessed for its potential in jails nationwide. It is a scaled-down version of a weapon developed for the military to rebuff large crowds from entering an area. That device was tested on the back of a Hummer for crowd control overseas.

The Los Angeles County Sheriff's Department two years ago began testing a civilian version of the military device but never deployed it. Some civil rights activists have expressed concern about using such weapons in a civilian setting.

Sheriff's officials are hoping a device installed at the Pitchess jail will allow a small number of deputies to break up large fights involving dozens of inmates before more deputies can arrive to the scene.

-- Richard Winton

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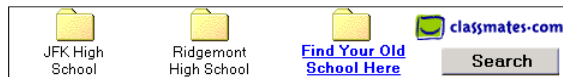
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I'm glad to see a working alternative to far more destructive and deadly tools guards need in the legitimate effort to protect themselves and others in jails. But just as prisoners seem to be able to produce a shiv from almost anything, we can all also be sure we're not long from the first reports that there are cops using this device to torture prisoners who annoy or enrage them.

And it may be a long time before one of them is careless enough to do it in front of a camera where the officer does not have influence or control over images the camera captures, and so until then every accusation will be ridiculed as the lie of a prisoner with no credibility.

Let's hope the device at least has a reliable system that cannot be tampered with to record uses, and perhaps even video images thereof.

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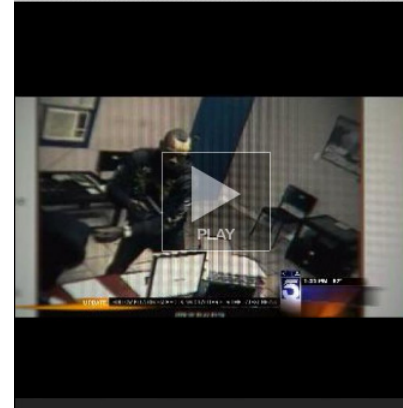
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