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Dangerous use of crowd-control weapons against medics and protesters in Portland, OR

On July 28, 2020, we interviewed a medic who had responded the preceding week to a woman calling for medical assistance at a protest against police brutality in Portland, OR, USA. He was wearing garb clearly marked with “medic”, a white helmet covered with bright pink crosses, and red crosses on his backpack and both shoulders. As he approached the injured woman, he saw a security official point him out to another man dressed in camouflage-coloured fatigues who was holding a grenade launcher. The medic described to us what happened next: “I was holding my hands up in the surrender position over my head saying as loud as I could, ‘I am a medic checking injuries. Don’t shoot.’ But the guy pointed the grenade launcher and shot me with a 40-mm CS [tear gas] canister that hit my left thigh, right on the side of my left upper thigh. I turned in a pain response, and they hit me with a rubber bullet on my right lateral thigh.”

This medic was one of many volunteers providing medical assistance at demonstrations in Portland, over the past 2 months, whom local and federal law enforcement officials severely injured. Another medic we interviewed as part of a Physicians for Human Rights (PHR) investigation in Portland described being shot squarely in his chest by a tear gas canister, resulting in a 15 × 12 cm haematoma surrounding a 5 cm diameter circular abrasion where the canister end hit. We interviewed and examined medics and non-violent demonstrators who had sustained severe head and neck injuries from rubber bullets and other impact munitions. In a PHR report, we have compiled evidence on destruction of volunteer medics’ medical supplies, and documented the lack of official provision of medical assistance and

transport to injured demonstrators. What we found was evidence of an excessive and disproportionate use of force by the local police (The Portland Police Bureau), and even more serious injuries caused by the federal forces sent to Portland in early July, 2020, by the Trump Administration, against the stated wishes of local and state officials.

For more than three decades, PHR has documented the health harms caused by so-called less than lethal crowd-control weapons such as tear gas, stun grenades, pepper balls, and rubber bullets. These crowd-control weapons are defined as “offering a substantially reduced risk of death when compared to conventional firearms”.² PHR has reviewed cases upon cases of serious injuries, disability, and death from misuse of crowd-control weapons around the world, from South Korea to Turkey to Panama to Bahrain. In 2013, one of us (MH) helped document the brutal and excessive police response to large-scale peaceful protests in Turkey.³ PHR’s report⁴ described the systematic misuse of tear gas, as well as death and injuries of protestors and clearly identified medical personnel from tear gas canisters, rubber bullets, and other kinetic impact projectiles.³

In light of our previous investigations, we were not surprised by what our investigation in Portland was revealing, but what added an extra dimension of horror was the grave health impacts of crowd-control weapons in our home country. Similar to documented attacks against medics and volunteers in other US cities,⁴ we were investigating abuses—during a devastating COVID-19 pandemic—against volunteers providing medical assistance and against people exercising their rights, protected by the US Constitution, to free speech and assembly in protesting the police killing of George Floyd and systemic racism in the USA.

Given the seriousness of the injuries we documented, there is a heavy

burden of proof on the government—whether in Istanbul, Turkey, or Portland, OR, USA, to show that these actions do not amount to excessive force that fails to comply with the international human rights principles of necessity, proportionality, legality, and accountability.⁵ The rights to freedom of expression and peaceful assembly are protected by the US Constitution and international treaties ratified by the USA; any use of force deployed against demonstrators must be used as a last resort after carefully weighing all other enforcement options. Troublingly, we did not witness or hear any accounts of de-escalation efforts by either federal agents or local police officers. We documented many instances of weapons being used in improper and potentially deadly ways, such as tear gas canisters fired at people’s chests and rubber bullets apparently aimed at people’s faces. As medical professionals and human rights advocates, we know that this is unacceptable.

Moreover, as in other countries where we have documented the use of crowd-control weapons, in Portland we also observed the failure of the fire department, police, and local or state governments to provide timely or effective medical care to protesters, even to those who were seriously injured by these weapons. We did not hear reports of, nor observe directly, any fire department or other official emergency medical technicians or paramedics providing immediate medical assistance at the demonstration site at any time over the period we were documenting injuries. Only one instance of an embedded police medic assisting in a medical assessment of an injured demonstrator was reported to us. Given the seriousness of the injuries and the type and quantity of munitions being deployed, the lack of protected official emergency services created serious health risks that could have long-lasting effects on the lives of those injured.



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For more on **misuse of crowd-control weapons in South Korea** see <https://phr.org/our-work/resources/the-use-of-tear-gas-in-the-republic-of-korea/>

For more on **misuse of crowd-control weapons in Turkey** see <https://phr.org/countries/turkey/>

For more on **misuse of crowd-control weapons in Panama** see <https://phr.org/countries/panama/>

For more on **misuse of crowd-control weapons in Bahrain** see <https://phr.org/our-work/resources/weaponizing-tear-gas/>

For the PHR report on **crowd-control weapons in Portland** see https://phr.org/our-work/resources/now-they-just-want-to-hurt-us-portland-oregon/?utm_term=lancet

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For states to uphold their human rights obligations, UN guidelines about use of force within the context of protests specify that “Whenever the lawful use of force and firearms is unavoidable, law enforcement officials shall...Ensure that assistance and medical aid are rendered to any injured or affected persons at the earliest possible moment”.⁵ These guidelines impose a responsibility on officials to ensure effective access to care. As we had seen in Istanbul, informal networks of volunteer medics and civil society organisations in Portland stepped up to tend to the injured and transport those severely injured to ambulances outside the protest areas or to local emergency departments, filling the gaps where official entities had abdicated their responsibilities. This is a situation reported to us as being all too familiar to Black Portlanders, who for decades have by necessity resorted to building informal community capacity to meet needs in the face of official neglect. During the protests of June and July, 2020, these essential medics and medical volunteers were themselves, in turn, targeted with violence.

Teresa Raiford, a national leader in anti-racist work and founder of Don’t Shoot Portland, an organisation playing a leading role in racial justice efforts in Portland, emphasised in our interview with her on July 28, 2020, the valuable role health professionals can have in these efforts: “Social workers, medics, nurses, physicians...everyone has to show up in order for a struggle for equality to be truly successful.” Whether in Hong Kong, Seoul, or Portland, OR, USA, inappropriate use of crowd-control weapons against protesters and medical volunteers by both local and federal law enforcement creates a chilling effect on people’s ability to exercise the fundamental rights of peaceful assembly and expression. Citizens and residents have had to weigh their risks of personal harm and poor access to formal emergency

medical care if injured with their desire to demonstrate their commitment to deeply held values and principles. A society where people do not feel safe to protest is a society that risks losing its most precious freedoms.

We declare no competing interests. We thank the many people who spent hours with us during our investigation in Portland.

**Michele Heisler, Kathryn Hampton, Donna McKay*
mheisler@phr.org

Physicians for Human Rights, New York, NY 10018, USA (MH, KH, DMck); and Department of Internal Medicine, University of Michigan Medical School and Department of Health Behavior and Health Education, School of Public Health, University of Michigan, Ann Arbor, MI, USA (MH)

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