

5th European Symposium on Non-Lethal Weapons, 11-13 May 2009

Final remarks by the Chairman of the Symposium Dr. Klaus-Dieter Thiel

Ladies and Gentlemen, Dear Non-Lethal Weapons community,

Before we reach the official end of the symposium, I would like to present my personal opinion on non-lethal weapons in the form of some statements and questions. I would like to stress that this is just my own, personal opinion.

Of course a lot of material could be covered, but due to pressure of time I can only concentrate on a few aspects. Some of these aspects are interrelated; others are independent.

I won't go into a definition of NLWs here, because I think that everyone knows what we are talking about. NLWs should not replace lethal weapons, but rather they are complementary to them.

I would like to start with some scenarios which I think are well-suited to the deployment of non-lethal weapons, namely camp protection, convoy security and checkpoints. Of course there are numerous other possibilities.

“If the only tool you have is a hammer, then you tend to treat all problems as a nail“.

This is a quotation from Abraham Maslow, an American psychologist.

Non-lethal weapons provide an option which falls between military presence and lethal force, between shouting and shooting, and

Non-lethal weapons should close the gap between shouting and shooting.

The core message is: non-lethal weapons are an alternative to lethal force, not an alternative to "doing nothing" in inverted commas.

Conflict situations are often unclear. You are uncertain of your opponent's aims and intentions. Your course of action is shaped by the fact that a wide spectrum of NLWs are available, and their effect on the target can be small, medium or high.

At the beginning of the conflict, the use of NLWs should start at the bottom of the scale, that is with NLWs at the "softer" end of the spectrum. The reaction of the target can then be observed. If the target does not react compliantly, NLWs from higher up the scale - that is with a stronger effect - should be used. If this graduated response does not prove successful and the conflict escalates, the deployment of more powerful weapons can be justified.

It is important and desirable to be able to judge the opponent's willingness to use violence and to attack, so that an appropriate reaction can be made. I would like to outline several possible cases:

- If the NLW deployed is too strong, that is if there is an overreaction of the control forces, this can provoke anger and the escalation of the conflict
- If the reaction of the control forces is too weak, this can lead to overconfidence and the escalation of the conflict

- Where the reaction of the control forces is appropriate, de-escalation is possible

Discriminating NLWs should be used in preference to non-discriminating NLWs. But can discriminating NLWs always be used? Does this apply in every case?

There are situations in which discriminating NLWs do not improve the situation, as there is a danger of a high level of collateral damage, for example when combatants are located in the midst of numerous non-combatants whom they might even be using as human shields. Is the use of non-discriminating NLWs justified in this case? In civil surroundings combatants can achieve a high level of camouflage, so that it is difficult to distinguish and engage in combat with them.

The numerous questions regarding NLWs can only be resolved through a holistic approach. NLWs should not be reduced to technology alone. A responsible approach takes account of legal, political, ethical, sociological, medical and other aspects.

In conclusion I would like to make an appeal to the media.

NLWs are an opportunity to save human lives in conflict situations. The NLW community is aware that the media plays an important role and has a significant influence on the opinions of individuals and society. When you report on the sensitive topic of NLWs we would ask you to do so responsibly.

Finally, on behalf of everyone concerned I would like to thank you for your participation and your contributions to the discussion. I wish you all a safe journey home.