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San Francisco Police Issue Statement Regarding the Use of Remote-Controlled Robots 22-172

December 01, 2022 | 7:33 PM
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On Tuesday, November 29, 2022, the San Francisco Board of Supervisors approved the “Law Enforcement Equipment Policy” by a vote of 8 to 3. Contained in the policy was approval for the SFPD to utilize potentially lethal force in extreme circumstances to save or prevent further loss of life.

“The passage of this policy is a testament to the confidence Mayor Breed, the Board of Supervisors, and the people of San Francisco have in our department and our officers, and I am humbled by their overwhelming support, said San Francisco Police Chief William Scott. “The use of robots in potentially deadly force situations is a last resort option. We live in a time when unthinkable mass violence is becoming more commonplace. We need the option to be able to save lives in the event we have that type of tragedy in our city.”

Background:

California Assembly Bill 481 requires law enforcement agencies in California to obtain approval from their applicable governing body, via adoption of a “Law Enforcement Use of Equipment Policy” through an ordinance, prior to the law

enforcement agency seeking funds, permanently or temporarily acquiring, using new or existing equipment. The approval of this policy allows the Department to continue using the tools in the current inventory in the manner we have since acquiring them. This use policy, as required by AB 481, is the first time this Department has addressed the specific use of force via robots.

The SFPD robots were acquired by the Department between 2010 and 2017. The SFPD does not own or operate robots outfitted with lethal force options and the Department has no plans to outfit robots with any type of firearm. The robots are remotely controlled and operated by SFPD officers who have undergone specialized training. Our robots are primarily used in EOD/bomb situations, hazardous materials incidents, and other incidents where officers may need to keep a safe distance before rendering a scene secure.

In extreme circumstances, robots could be used to deliver an explosive charge to breach a structure containing a violent or armed subject. The charge would be used to incapacitate or disorient a violent, armed, or dangerous subject who presents a risk of loss of life. This type of explosive charge is considered a Type III intermediate force option (or Type IV in the case of serious injury or death) in the SFPD's Use of Force Policy (DGO 5.01), which the San Francisco Police Commission recently adopted. It could potentially cause injury or be lethal. Robots equipped in this manner would only be used to save or prevent further loss of innocent lives. Only the chief of police, assistant chief of operations, or deputy chief of special operations may authorize the use of robots as a potentially deadly force option.

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