

Wed, November 19, 2008

Police put in tight jam. Cell phone jammers might silence annoying public chat, but they also risk officers' safety

The Mounties have warned every police agency in the country about cell phone jammers after two Quebec officers were left with two suspects and dead radios on a darkened highway shoulder last month.

It was Oct. 15 and the Quebec City police officers had stopped a car whose occupants they believed were connected with organized crime. When they approached the car, they saw "a suspicious device" on its door, police sources said.

The suspects told police they bought the "jammer" -- which sends out a powerful radio signal that makes it impossible for phones within a 10-metre radius to communicate with cell towers -- on eBay.

The officers seized the jammer and alerted their criminal intelligence section. That section alerted the Cornwall integrated criminal intelligence section which sent the officer safety bulletin nationwide on Oct. 29.

HAND-HELD MODELS

"It's something we have to be cognizant of when we're going to calls," Ottawa police spokesman Const. Alain Boucher said this week.

"If our radios aren't working, it's possible jammers are out there."

Hand-held jammers, which are easily purchased online for about \$200, are becoming increasingly common in the U.S., where people are eager to silence chatty public transit users. The sites that advertise "jammers" include owners of cafes and hair salons, hoteliers, public speakers, theatre operators, bus drivers and public transportation commuters.

One model available on the Internet is a \$950 jammer that looks like a box of Marlboro cigarettes.

"Clear a restaurant in moments, ensure silence in the movie theatre. Go straight to jail if you use it in the wrong country. Sixty feet range. A hundred miles of coolness. \$950," the advertisement reads.

Police and military have used them to break up communication in hostage situations, for example.

But Mounties say the devices, in the wrong hands, cause a serious threat to officer safety. They're also a threat to public safety because the digital radios used by police and fire can be cut off by them.

"Certainly we'd be concerned that we wouldn't be able to safely intercept and apprehend suspects," RCMP spokesman Sgt. Michael Harvey said.

"In this case, they were out on the highway, in a vehicle and they wouldn't be able to get help. When officer safety is in jeopardy, so is public safety."

It's illegal in Canada and the United States to use cell jammers.

In the U.S., the Federal Communication Commission will fine first-time offenders up to \$11,000. It's also considered theft because companies that have bought the airways consider them their property.

Harvey said the memo is a testament to the benefits of police agencies working together.

"That's the power of communication and information sharing," he said.

SIGNAL NOT AVAILABLE

Disrupting a cell phone is the same as jamming any other type of radio communication. A cell phone works by communicating with its service network through a cell tower or base station. Cell towers divide a city into small areas, or cells. As a cell phone user drives down the street, the signal is handed from tower to tower.

A jamming device transmits on the same radio frequencies as the cell phone, disrupting the communication between the phone and the cell phone base station in the tower.

It's called a denial-of-service attack. The jammer denies service of the radio spectrum to the cell phone users within range of the jamming device.