

U.S. rethinks giving excess military gear to police

By Tami Abdollah and Eric Tucker, AP

WASHINGTON – After a decade of sending military equipment to civilian police departments across the country, federal officials are reconsidering the idea in light of the violence in Ferguson, Missouri.

The public has absorbed images of heavily armed police, snipers trained on protesters and tear gas plumes. Against that backdrop, Attorney General Eric Holder said that when police and citizens need to restore calm, “I am deeply concerned that the deployment of military equipment and vehicles sends a conflicting message.”

Sen. Claire McCaskill, D-Mo., said police responses like that in Ferguson have “become the problem instead of the solution.” Rep. Hank Johnson, D-Ga., said he will introduce legislation to reverse police militarization.

Sen. Carl Levin, D-Mich., chairman of the Senate Armed Services Committee, said his committee will review the program to determine if the Defense Department’s surplus equipment is being used as intended.

One night after the violence that accompanied the presence of military-style equipment in Ferguson, tensions eased when a police captain, unprotected and shaking hands, walked through a crowd in a gesture of reconciliation. The contrast added to perception that the tanks and tear gas had done more harm than good.

As the country concludes its longest wartime period, the military has turned over thousands of surplus weapons and armored trucks to local police who often trained alongside the

military.

A report by the American Civil Liberties Union in June said police agencies had become “excessively militarized,” with officers using training and equipment designed for the battlefield on city streets. The report found the amount of goods transferred through the military surplus program rose from \$1 million in 1990 to nearly \$450 million in 2013.

“Every police force of any size in this country has access to those kinds of weapons now,” said David Harris, a police expert at the University of Pittsburgh law school. “It makes it more likely to be used (and) is an escalation all by itself.”

In Louisiana, masked police in full body armor carrying AR-15 assault rifles raided a nightclub without a warrant, looking not for terrorists but underage drinkers and fire-code violations. Officers in California train using the same counterinsurgency tactics as those used in Afghanistan.

“They’re not coming in like we’re innocent until proven guilty,” said Quinn Eaker. SWAT teams last August raided his organic farm and community, the Garden of Eden, in Arlington, Texas. “They’re coming in like: ‘We’re gonna kill you if you move a finger.’”

Police found no drugs or weapons and filed no charges after their search, which authorities said followed standard procedure.

In 1990, Congress authorized the Pentagon to give surplus equipment to police to help fight drugs, which then gave way to the fight against terrorism. Though violent crime nationwide is at its lowest level in generations and wars in Iraq and Afghanistan have largely concluded, the military transfers have increased.

Police say the equipment, which includes free body armor,

night vision goggles and scopes, keeps officers safe and prepares them for the worst case.

“A lot evolved from the military, no question,” said Los Angeles County Sheriff’s Chief Bill McSweeney, who heads the detective division. “Is it smart for them to use that stuff and perhaps look like soldiers from Iraq going into a place? Is that smart or over the top? I’d say generally that’s smart. Now, if you use that every time a guy is writing bad checks, that’s getting rather extreme.”

The U.S. has provided 610 mine-resistant armored trucks, known as MRAPs, across the country, nearly all since August 2013, including at least nine in Los Angeles County, according to Michelle McCaskill, a spokeswoman for the Defense Logistics Agency.

In rural western Maine, the Oxford County Sheriff’s Office, which had not reported a murder in more than 20 years, asked for an MRAP. Cpl. George Cayer, wrote in his request that Maine’s western foothills face a “previously unimaginable threat from terrorist activities.”

In Orange County, Florida, masked officers in tactical gear helped state inspectors raid barber shops in 2010 to find people cutting hair without a license. Using a mini battering ram and pry bar at times, police arrested dozens of people. Officials said they found illegal items such as drugs and a weapon.

McSweeney said it’s hard to argue that police shouldn’t use the best equipment available.

“It’s tempting to say, ‘Shouldn’t we wear these things? Shouldn’t we approach this as if we could get shot?’” he said. “How do you say no to that question?”

Nick Gragnani, executive director of the St. Louis Area Regional Response System, said such supplies have proved

essential in hurricane relief efforts and other disaster responses.

“The shame of it will be ... if somebody does a brushstroke and takes out all the funding and then we can no longer be prepared for that big incident,” he said.

The LAPD’s deputy chief, Michael Downing, who heads the department’s counterterrorism and special operations bureau, said officers are dealing with “an adversary who is more sophisticated, more tactically trained.”

Downing emphasized that though police might train with soldiers, they’re not warriors with a mission to kill but public servants with no “enemies.”

“In police work there are times we have to become soldiers and control through force and fear,” Downing said. “But we have to come back to being a public servant as quick as we can to establish that normality and that ethical stature with communities, because they’re the ones who give us the authority to do our police work.”