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Obama Calls for Restricting Military Gear to Local Police

In effort to improve relations between police and communities, White House has announced new standards for federal programs in the aftermath of the Ferguson protests

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President Barack Obama said Monday that he would ban federal transfers of certain military-style equipment to police departments as part of a broader administration effort to build trust between law enforcement and communities.

With tensions still simmering after several police killings of unarmed African-American men, the White House released a blueprint detailing dozens of recommendations for improving policing and announced that an executive order would halt the federal provision of some military gear to local law-enforcement agencies. Prohibited equipment will include tracked armored vehicles, weaponized aircraft, bayonets, grenade launchers, large-caliber firearms and some camouflage uniforms.

The administration announced more stringent controls for other equipment, including unmanned aerial vehicles, some specialized firearms, explosives and riot gear. Law-enforcement agencies requesting such gear will be required to seek the consent of local government and ensure that personnel are trained to use the equipment.

The White House called for a review of the equipment programs last year after street protests in Ferguson, Mo., over the shooting death of an 18-year-old black man by a police officer. Images of police wielding military-style rifles and using armored vehicles to control the protests sparked concerns about the militarization of local law-enforcement agencies.

Mr. Obama said police use of such equipment can send the wrong message by intimidating and alienating local residents.

“We’ve seen how militarized gear can sometimes give people a feeling like there’s an occupying force, as opposed to a force that’s part of the community that’s protecting them and serving them,” the president said Monday in Camden, N.J. “We’re going to prohibit some equipment made for the battlefield that is not appropriate for local police departments.”

The president last fall defended the program created by Congress in the 1990s to allow law-enforcement agencies to obtain excess Defense Department supplies, but said his administration would develop new rules and improve oversight.

A working group created by the White House conducted a months-long review and found a lack of coordination among federal agencies and no consistent standards for police departments seeking equipment.

Richard Beary, president of the International Association of Chiefs of Police, said the administration admirably tried to strike a balance between police departments' needs and community concerns. Still unanswered, he said, is how the new standards will affect the way law-enforcement agencies get essential equipment.

“What is it going to take for officers to obtain that equipment?” he asked. “The real question is: How slow is this going to be?”

Jim Bueermann, president of the Police Foundation, a nonpartisan nonprofit, described the administration's approach as thoughtful. The decision to ban federal transfers of certain equipment won't preclude police departments from purchasing that gear from private vendors Mr. Bueermann noted, adding the limited list of prohibited items wasn't likely to impede policing. “I don't have any comprehension about why you would need a bayonet in domestic policing,” he said.

Other groups called the administration's action an important step toward a return to police acting as peace officers.

“We have too often seen with this military trend police using force right away and escalating a situation that doesn't need to be escalated,” said Tim Lynch, director of the Project on Criminal Justice at the libertarian Cato Institute.

Mr. Obama's response to Ferguson also included creating the Task Force on 21st Century Policing. The panel's final report, also released Monday, said law enforcement should “embrace a guardian—rather than a warrior—mindset to build trust and legitimacy.” The task force also offered recommendations for improving police policies and oversight and for strengthening training and education for law enforcement. It included a call for expanded efforts to connect police officers with neighborhoods and outlined strategies for boosting the use of body cameras and other technology.

Most of the proposals aren't expected to be controversial, and some have been discussed by law enforcement for years. On Monday, the administration announced a grant program to provide funds to some local law-enforcement agencies that commit to implementing the task force's recommendations.

In Camden on Monday, Mr. Obama lauded a city that has struggled with crime and poverty but now has overhauled its police department and jump-started economic development initiatives.

Among other steps, the city's unionized police force was replaced by a county-led division, a move that drew criticism of union-busting.

Mr. Obama praised the police force for focusing on community policing. Administration officials have hailed Camden's efforts to build trust between the police and the community, reduce violent crime, create jobs and address opportunity gaps for minority boys and young men.

"This city is onto something," Mr. Obama said.

The overhaul of Camden's police department has been controversial, though, spurring complaints from civil-liberties groups that police have used excessive force and have been too aggressive in issuing summonses for minor infractions.