

Article36

Article 36 remarks
CCW meeting of experts on lethal autonomous weapons systems
Friday, 17 April

Statement to session on 'way ahead'

Mr. Chairperson,

The expert presentations and discussions this week have explored a broad range of aspects related to autonomous weapons systems, and the serious concerns such weapons systems would present.

The most fundamental being the moral and ethical concerns around delegating decisions over the use of force to machines, and as Christof Heyns noted, the affront to human dignity that this entails, whether in armed conflict or domestic policing.

Our main observation on the week is that there is a strong sense that we should not be going down the road of developing autonomous weapons systems.

The concerns raised this week by many actors should provide a barrier to the development of autonomous weapons systems, but more definitive action will be required to ensure this is the case.

We believe that there should be an explicit requirement for meaningful human control over the operation of weapons systems, and specifically over every individual attack.

This week we have not heard any state argue that weapons systems should be allowed to operate without human control, or with human control that is devoid of meaning.

In fact, 'human control' or 'human judgement' over the operation of weapons systems has been the main point of convergence among states this week.

Convergence around this principle, and indeed views that the concept of meaningful human control is too vague, should be taken as an opportunity to hold focused discussions to explore it in greater depth, including how meaningful human control is ensured over existing weapons systems.

If states are able to provide answers on how meaningful human control is ensured over weapons systems, then we expect that this will lead to the conclusion that a prohibition is required on fully autonomous weapons systems.

Mr Chair,

Given the richness of the debate this week, as well as the extensive interest from media and parliamentarians outside this room, it seems to us that the only responsible course of action is to initiate a process of international meetings dedicated to developing a prohibition on fully autonomous weapons systems on the basis that they do not allow for meaningful human control over every individual attack.

States should urgently begin this work. The upcoming CCW Review Conference next year would be an appropriate milestone to ensure we are well on track to developing such a prohibition. The Human Rights Council would be another relevant forum to hold further discussion on this issue as well.

On transparency - Whilst a focus on transparency in relation to developments on autonomous weapons systems is certainly useful, the extent that this can be seen as a robust response to the problem posed by autonomous weapons systems can only be measured by the amount of transparency we see from states.

In relation to article 36 weapons reviews and processes, we are strongly supportive of efforts to increase scrutiny over the development and use of weapons, means and methods of warfare, including in the context of legal reviews under additional protocol I.

We think this week's discussion clearly shows that the legality, morality and desirability of pursuing autonomous weapons is highly contested. Different states will therefore have widely varying approaches to legal reviews of such systems.

Against that background we think that rather than a specific discussion in relation to weapons reviews of autonomous weapons systems, it would be more sensible to start with a discussion on the broader practice of legal reviews of weapons, means and methods of warfare.

This course of action has previously been recommended by a number of delegations at the CCW, including before the CCW took up work on autonomous weapons. We look forward to contributing to specific CCW work on the wider issue of legal reviews.

Thank you.