

Statement to the informal discussions on autonomous weapon systems

Pia Devoto - Tuesday, 29 June 2021

Thank you chair,

I speak on behalf of the Campaign to Stop Killer Robots. May I begin by stating that we appreciate your work, and the work of all states participating here, to continue to drive forward this conversation towards limits on autonomy in weapons systems.

Autonomous weapons systems pose a range of ethical, legal and operational concerns.

The challenges presented are serious - and have potential to erode our commitment to human dignity, to undermine respect for existing legal rules, to weaken accountability for harms in conflict and to negatively shape our relationship with automated decision making across all areas of society.

These issues have implications beyond the immediate context of controlling behavior in conflict and may have devastating consequences for humanity for generations to come. They are of a seriousness that demands an urgent response.

And it is to these meetings of states that the world is looking for such a response.

We are pleased that a significant number of states have responded to the Chair's invitation to provide submissions on the way forward.

Through a combination of both joint statements from groups of states, and individual contributions from specific states, a total of 105 parties to the CCW have now submitted recommendations on the normative and operational framework on autonomous weapon systems.

We find in those submissions, and in other changes to the political landscape in recent months, significant grounds for optimism - momentum is building towards a stronger shared understanding of the dangers of autonomy in weapon systems, and a stronger shared understanding of the structure of response that is necessary.

The characterization of autonomous weapon systems is now crystallizing around the broad range of weapon systems that rely on the processing of sensor information to automatically select and engage targets. This provides a solid foundation for understanding the scope of weapon systems around which a new framework is required.

There is also now a clear recognition that a response to this issue needs to contain both prohibitions *and* positive obligations.

The Campaign to Stop Killer Robots believes that prohibitions are needed on systems which function in a way that would be unacceptable. This includes

- Systems that cannot be used with meaningful human control, *and importantly*
- Systems that would use sensors to automatically target human beings.

And we see the need for positive obligations in order to maintain meaningful human control:

- To ensure that operators understand the systems that they are using, and
- To ensure that they can limit and understand the context of operations in order to

make meaningful human judgements in relation to existing legal rules.

We see in the submissions from a diverse range of states this month, a clear movement towards this structure – that includes both prohibitions and positive obligations.

We strongly commend the joint contribution submitted by the group of six states including Costa Rica, Panama, the Philippines, Sierra Leone, Uruguay and Peru, that contribution draws out the key elements of a response that is necessary, and also recommends a prohibition of autonomous weapon systems that target human beings.

But this same structure of prohibitions and positive obligations is also apparent in a wide range of other papers, which in total make up the **majority** of countries party to the CCW.

And whilst there may, for now, be some divergence in those submissions on the details of specific rules, or on the status that those rules should be given – this movement towards a shared structure is a positive step forward in this conversation.

That said - - - the form our response takes to this issue is very important.

The CCW is an instrument that, in its preamble, reaffirms “the need to continue the codification and progressive development of the rules of international law.”

The law recognises the need for its own continued development. Society does not stand still, and the law must evolve.

The type of rules that are needed in response to this issue are of a form that demands legal expression. And the **majority** of states have now recognised that a legal response is needed.

We have had guiding principles, and we have had principles turned into political declarations.

States need to turn themselves now to the negotiation of a legal instrument.

The CCW has an opportunity to take that step at the forthcoming Review Conference. We urge states to build on the momentum that this conversation has

now, to continue to refine proposals for the rules required, and to adopt a mandate to negotiate a legal response.

If the CCW cannot take that step then States will have to find another way. Because it is morally and legally necessary - and the world demands that action is taken.

After the disruption and dislocation we have all experienced over the last year we are privileged to be a group of people that have the capacity to work together to address a shared social challenge. The Campaign to Stop Killer Robots continues to grow and now has 180 members in 67 countries worldwide. We look forward to working with states and other organisations to get this done.

Thank you Chair