Background
The expanded use of armed drones or unmanned aerial vehicles and other technologies are already dramatically changing warfare, with a firm trend developing toward ever-greater autonomy. The prospect of robotic weapons that would choose and fire on targets on their own without any human intervention poses a fundamental challenge to the protection of civilians and to compliance with international human rights and humanitarian law.

Six months ago a new international civil society coalition was launched in London to tackle fully autonomous weapons. The Campaign to Stop Killer Robots calls for the creation of an international treaty that would require that human beings are always meaningfully involved in decisions to select and engage targets.

Current context
Shortly after the campaign’s launch, on 30 May, the Human Rights Council debated a report on ‘lethal autonomous robotic weapons’ prepared by the United Nations (UN) Special Rapporteur on extrajudicial, summary or arbitrary executions. The report by Professor Christof Heyns lists numerous ethical, legal, policy, technical, and other concerns, and calls for a moratorium on fully autonomous weapons until new international law is achieved. It recommends the establishment of a high-level panel of experts from different fields to “propose a framework to enable the international community to address effectively the legal and policy issues.”

Two-dozen states spoke in the debate at the Human Rights Council debate following the presentation of the UN report. All expressed interest in the challenges posed by these weapons and none opposed working on the issue. There was discussion as to the most appropriate forum for taking this issue forward, with Brazil and France suggesting the Geneva-based Convention on Conventional Weapons and others opting for the Human Rights Council, also in Geneva.

The topic of fully autonomous weapons is clearly relevant to the UN General Assembly’s First Committee on Disarmament and International Security, which addresses various weapons-related concerns as well as global challenges and threats to peace that affect the international community.
The UNGA First Committee can be a useful venue for states and civil society to register their concerns with specific weapons systems and propose suggestions for ways to address them. This can be done in statements, but also in side events and bilateral conversations. Past UNGA resolutions that started in First Committee have also helped states to begin looking at these issues of concern.

In her statement to the Human Rights Council debate, the UN High Representative for Disarmament Affairs Angela Kane said that “the pace of technological developments continues to accelerate” and asserted that so too “must our efforts to come to grips with the implications of emerging weapon systems in the fields of international peace and security, disarmament, human rights and humanitarian affairs.” As Kane notes, delegating targeting and kill decisions to robotic machines that operate without any human supervision is a multisectoral issue, with various aspects to consider from use to proliferation to potential humanitarian impact to fundamental ethical and moral questions.

**Recommendations for governments**

All states participating in the 2013 session of the UNGA First Committee should add the topic of fully autonomous weapons to the list of weapons systems of concern that require urgent attention. In their statements, delegations should welcome the calls for international debate on this topic and describe how they will seek to advance discussions at the international level. The UNGA First Committee is held a month before the annual meeting of the Convention on Conventional Weapons (CCW) so it is a useful place to begin discussing a possible CCW mandate on fully autonomous weapons as well as the preparations necessary to establish such a mandate.

*In addition, all states should welcome the UN report on lethal autonomous robotics and endorse its four recommendations:*

- Place a national moratorium on lethal autonomous robotics.
- Declare a commitment to abide by international humanitarian law and international human rights law in all activities surrounding robotic weapons and put in place and implement rigorous processes to ensure compliance at all stages of development.
- Commit to being as transparent as possible about internal weapons review processes, including metrics used to test robotic systems.
- Participate in international debate and transgovernmental dialogue on the issue of lethal autonomous robotics and exchange best practices.

The multifaceted nature of the issue of fully autonomous weapons requires that it be considered from a range of different perspectives and civil society is keen to provide its views and ideas on what can be done. The campaign's NGO founders include roboticists, scientists, and other technical experts as well as former officials, such as past UN disarmament chief Ambassador Jayathana Dhanapala, president of the Pugwash Conferences on Science and World Affairs. It includes Nobel peace laureates and NGOs that were centrally involved in the successful international campaigns to ban landmines and cluster munitions. All delegates are invited to a side event on fully autonomous weapons that campaign representatives will be speaking at on Monday, 21 October.