Background
In the short space of less than two years, the question of what to do about autonomous weapons that, once activated, would select and fire on targets without meaningful human control has vaulted to the top of the global disarmament and international security agenda. Such weapons raise numerous ethical, legal, moral, policy, and technical concerns.

The Campaign to Stop Killer Robots, a coalition of non-governmental organisations, was launched in April 2013. The Campaign 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. In November 2013, parties to the Convention on Conventional Weapons (CCW) agreed to begin to “discuss the questions related to emerging technologies in the area of lethal autonomous weapons systems.”

Current context
At the CCW’s first “informal meeting of experts” held at the UN in Geneva on 13–16 May 2014, experts provided several examples of existing robotic systems with various degrees of autonomy and lethality. There was acknowledgment that these precursors indicate the trend to ever-greater autonomy in warfare. During the meeting a few states delivered vague statements that appeared to seek to leave the door open for future technologies, but none vigorously defended or argued for fully autonomous weapons. Only the Czech Republic and Israel spoke on the possible desirability of such systems.¹

There was general technical agreement that fully autonomous weapons could not fully comply with international humanitarian law for the foreseeable future except in very limited circumstances. Most delegations that spoke highlighted the importance of maintaining meaningful human control over targeting and attack decisions.

There was acknowledgment that international humanitarian and human rights law applies to all new weapons, but views were divided as to whether the weapons would be illegal under existing law or if their use would be permitted in certain circumstances. There was a robust debate on the question of whether existing international law can prevent the proliferation and use of fully autonomous weapons or address ethical, moral, and societal expectations on the question of human dignity and whether machines should be permitted to take a human life.
The CCW experts meeting, in which 87 governments and many civil society organisations participated, was widely viewed as a success with one glaring exception, namely the lack of any non-male experts among the line-up of 18 presenters. This has been attributed to a lack of input from CCW states to the chair even though many women are publishing and speaking on the topic. Thus this appears to be symptomatic of a broader problem. Governments and UN bodies must actively work to ensure gender diversity in deliberations relating to disarmament, peace, and security discussions by recognizing, engaging, and including non-male experts.

The high level of engagement at the first multilateral meeting on killer robots indicates there is appetite for continuing this work in 2015, which is reflected in the chair’s report from the meeting. The chair’s report reflects emerging consensus around the concept of meaningful human control, which could provide a firm basis for continued discussions.
Recommendations for governments

During First Committee:

- Delegations should acknowledge that fully autonomous weapons require urgent international action, as the Campaign to Stop Killer Robots, United Nations, International Committee of the Red Cross, and others have demanded;
- They should express support for a renewed mandate to continue and expand Convention on Conventional Weapons deliberations on the topic in 2015, as well as seek gender diversity in such deliberations;
- They should also articulate other ways that fully autonomous weapons can be addressed at the international, regional, and national levels.

Beyond First Committee:

- In November 2014, the CCW should agree to a mandate that creates a formal group of governmental experts to continue discussions on autonomous weapons.
- All states should develop and articulate national policies on fully autonomous weapons in consultation with relevant actors, including civil society.
- All states should implement the recommendations on autonomous weapons contained in the 2013 and 2014 reports by the UN Special Rapporteur on extrajudicial, summary or arbitrary executions, including the call for a moratorium on fully autonomous weapons until new international law is achieved.

1  For statements and reports on this meeting, see http://www.reachingcriticalwill.org/disarmament-fora/others/ccw/2014.