Fully autonomous weapons (“killer robots”)
Campaign to Stop Killer Robots

Background
Two multilateral meetings on “lethal autonomous weapons systems” have been held at the United Nations (UN) in Geneva since May 2014 to consider technical, legal, operational, ethical, and other questions raised by these weapons that, once activated, would select and fire on targets without further human intervention. It is crucial that states demonstrate progress on the challenges posed by “killer robots” by agreeing in November to an expanded and more substantive mandate of work in 2016 that identifies actions that need to be taken.

The Campaign to Stop Killer Robots, a coalition of non-governmental organisations launched in April 2013, is calling for the talks to result in the adoption of new international law to preemptively ban fully autonomous weapons. Others have proposed national moratoria on fully autonomous weapons until new international law is achieved. A number of states have expressed their support for these calls, while others have proposed greater transparency and a focus on legal reviews of new weapons systems. No state has objected to the emerging international process on killer robots or proposed that nothing be done.

Current context
Some 87 states participated in the first “informal meeting of experts” held by the Convention on Conventional Weapons (CCW) on 13–16 May 2014, while 90 attended the second experts meeting held on 12-16 April 2015.

Of the 50 states that have expressed their views to date on fully autonomous weapons, almost all have highlighted various concerns with the weapons and most have indicated their strong support for the international talks. Several states—including Canada, France, Japan, and the UK—have explicitly stated that they are not developing fully autonomous weapons and have no intent to do so in the future. Only three states—the Czech Republic, Israel, and United States—spoke about the possible advantages or benefits that they perceive fully autonomous weapons could provide.

At both CCW experts meetings, a majority of states referred to the need for meaningful or effective or adequate human control of autonomous weapons. For the campaign, the concept of human control is not about finding or building “better” or “safer” autonomous weapons. Rather it is a notion that states should use to draw the line and prohibit weapons systems that do not operate under human control.
At the CCW meetings there has been widespread acknowledgment that fully autonomous weapons must fully comply with key principles of international humanitarian law, but many questions about whether the current technology will do that and what the foreseeable future holds. The campaign, the International Committee of the Red Cross, the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute, and others have suggested that states focus on critical functions of target acquisition and selection as well as the use of force involved in today’s automated or autonomous weapons, as this would provide a platform for future discussions on the nature of human control required.

The notion of human dignity and the moral question of whether machines should be permitted to take a human life on or off the battlefield have emerged as overarching issues of concern. Russia and other states have suggested the Martens Clause is applicable to fully autonomous weapons, and that the question of whether such weapons would run counter to the dictates of public conscience and the principles of humanity will need to be answered.

The nature of the work going forward (formal or informal), content of a future mandate (area of focus), and amount of time to be dedicated (one week again or additional time) is currently the focus of consultations led by Sri Lanka’s
Ambassador Ravinath Aryasinha, who will preside over the next CCW meeting, where states will decide on November 13 whether to continue their deliberations in 2016.

An ambitious mandate is needed so that states can act with the urgency that this issue demands. A Group of Governmental Experts (GGE) would help advance deliberations to a new level, demonstrate progress, and emphasise that the CCW work is outcome-oriented and not a talk shop. Open-ended GGEs have been the established method of work for CCW deliberations over the past two decades on concerns ranging from landmines to explosive remnants of war to cluster munitions. Based on that long-standing precedent, the GGE would be open to all interested states as well as to NGO representatives and key documents would be translated into the official UN languages. A GGE would therefore help to enable the broadest possible participation by all states.

**Recommendations for governments**

*During First Committee:*

- Delegations should acknowledge the concerns raised over fully autonomous weapons and express support for a strengthened and expanded CCW mandate of work in 2016 via a GGE meeting for a total of three to four weeks.
- Delegations should articulate their national policy on fully autonomous weapons, including their position on the calls for a moratorium or ban.

*Beyond First Committee:*

- At the CCW meeting on 13 November 2015, states should agree to a mandate that establishes a GGE that will meet for three to four weeks of work in order to deepen discussions on fully autonomous weapons and recommend action to be taken at the CCW’s Fifth Review Conference in late 2016.
- 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.
- All states should develop formal national policies on fully autonomous weapons.