Thank you. Thank you Mr. Chairperson. First of all, Germany wishes to thank you and your staff, as well as the staff of the Geneva Office of Disarmament Affairs, for the preparation of this expert meeting. You have managed to bring here an impressive number of well-known experts on robotics, ethics, and international law. As this is the first time we will discuss the issue on lethal autonomous weapons systems in depth, in the framework of the CCW, we very much welcome to have this expertise present to help us.

In the first round of discussions, the main task will be to ask the right questions in order to more clearly define the topic we are talking about.

Mr. Chairperson, let me be very clear from the beginning, Germany does not intend to have any weapons systems that take away the decision about life and death from man. We firmly believe that there should be a common understanding in the international community that it is indispensable to maintain human control over the decision to kill another human being. For Germany, this principle of human control is the foundation of the entire international humanitarian law. It is based on the right to live, on one hand, and on the right to dignity on the other. Even in times of war, human beings cannot be made simple objects of machine action.

Mr. Chairperson, scientific and technological progress of the last decades has been stunning. In robotics, we see cars that take over more and more tasks from the driver. For instance, parking or holding speed on the highway. In the household, we see little robots for vacuum cleaning or mowing the lawn. Many things we would have thought science fiction in the 70s and 80s, such as humanoid robots interacting with humans are still only in imagination, but their realization has become much more tangible. People are already working on the development of robots in helping to care for the elderly.

Despite all this impressive progress, there’s a general understanding that there are no lethal autonomous weapons systems yet. On the other hand, this makes dealing with this topic very complex as we talk about a target that has not materialized yet. We do not have a crystal ball to tell us what kind of weapons systems might be possible in the future and what their exact features will be like. We will certainly have to adapt our thinking over time. This is all the more true as our lives and societies are likely to change dramatically with the arrival of more and more autonomous machines in our daily lives.

On the other hand, there’s the great advantage of being able to make ourselves aware of many possible consequences of new weapons systems before they exist.

Mr. Chairperson, many questions are on the table for this expert meeting. It would not be fair to expect all the answers from just four days of discussions. I said before, at this time it is more important to ask the right questions. Therefore, Germany deems that this expert meeting is very timely in order to initiate thorough and systematic international debate. Above all, there’s the question of the definition of “lethal autonomous weapons systems”. There’s a general understanding that a machine might act without human intervention. But didn’t man program the machine and thus intervene at the very
beginning? We will have to thoroughly look into the definition of what is “autonomous” in contrast to “automatic” and “automated”.

Furthermore, we have to take into account that automated systems are already an integral part of our defence …(??) in our efforts to protect the lives of our soldiers. This will and must also be the case for the future. In scientific literature, there are a number of different proposals as where to draw the line between “autonomous” and “automated”. And probably our understanding as to where to draw the line will even evolve over time as technological advances are made and machines become more and more part of our daily lives.

There’s the question whether lethal autonomous weapons systems would ever be able to abide by international humanitarian law. Because one thing must be clear: international humanitarian law does apply also to the new weapons systems. Its principles are not negotiable. But would a lethal autonomous weapon system be able to discriminate between combatants as legitimate targets and non-combatants? Would a lethal autonomous weapons system ever be able to apply the principle of proportionality in order to assess whether the possible collateral damages of a military attack are justified by the achievable military advantage? Many experts and scientists express serious doubts whether a computer will ever be able to make such qualitative evaluations. There’s the question of legal accountability and responsibility for the action of lethal autonomous weapons. Is our current legal system adapted to receive machines as actors, do existing laws of the national and international level apply, who will be held accountable in cases of mistakes and malfunctions, do we really need a human being to be held accountable? And of course, there’s the question of how autonomous weapons systems would change our attitude to war and our methods of warfare if they ever came into being. Would States be really more willing to start wars if their own soldiers face lethal risks? Wouldn’t risks for the government just emerge on a different level - judicial, criminal, diplomatic, political?

Mr. Chairperson, we firmly believe that there should be a common understanding in the international community that it is indispensable to maintain meaningful human control over the decisions to kill another human being. We cannot take humans out of the loop. We do believe that the principle of human control is already implicitly inherent in international humanitarian law which, I said before, remains a binding and guiding line also with regard to the new weapons systems. And we cannot see any more any reason why technological development should all of the sudden suspend the validity of the principle of human control.

Therefore we suggest that in the discussion about the definition and legal evaluation of lethal autonomous weapons systems, we should also talk about what we, as an international community, understand as “meaningful human control” and declare it an indispensable principle of international humanitarian law. We therefore highly appreciate the possibility to discuss the perspectives and possibly the risks for such developments in the framework of the CCW in the upcoming days in order to look for common positions.

Thank you very much, Mr. Chairperson.