Meeting of the High Contracting Parties to the Convention on Certain Conventional Weapons (CCW)

Lethal Autonomous Weapons Systems

Geneva, 13 November 2014

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Mr. Chairman,

At the outset, let me convey, through you, our thanks to the outgoing Chairman, Ambassador Jean-Hugues Simon-Michel of France, for steering the first CCW Meeting of Experts on Lethal Autonomous Weapons Systems (LAWS) in May this year and for presenting his report this afternoon.

While the discussions helped clarify and deepen certain issues, they also underlined the complexity of the topic as well as the uncertainty of technological developments. Accordingly, the pursuance of our work seems self-evident.

As we proceed in our work, the mandate and the parameters of the meeting should be adapted in order to enable us to address the complexity of the issue.

Therefore, my delegation fully supports the option of evolving the mandate by extending the discussion to five days and to ensure documentation of our work. This would allow for a deepening of our discussions and, more importantly, for keeping track of our work. We would also suggest reflecting whether the nature of the report of the meeting of experts could be slightly evolved in order to include recommendations for future work. As for the working methods, arrangements with sub-groups addressing specific issues rather than solely working in plenary could be worth exploring. Future discussions could also benefit from a greater range of experts participating in possible panel discussions.
Mr. Chairman,

The goal of next year’s work must be to bring us closer to a common understanding of the subject matter and to a shared assessment of the challenges that come with it. It seems essential to create clarity about what an autonomous weapons system is and which specific characteristics or critical functions raise concerns. In addition, it is important to get a better understanding of the technological state of the art. While some trends towards autonomy have already materialised, we recognise that key concerns relate to future developments, hence adding an additional layer of uncertainty to our discussions.

In this context we should continue discussions next year on what has the potential to unite us. The meeting in May revealed, for instance, a considerable convergence among participants that the development of weapons systems which in their search, identification, target acquisition and engagement are free from any meaningful human control, would cause considerable concern. There was no doubt among the participants that their development and use in armed conflict is governed by international law and notably international humanitarian law (IHL), including the requirement to carry out legal reviews of new weapons. Finally, we concur with the opinion expressed by military experts that LAWS are not a generally favored weapons system since commanders actually seek more rather than less control over the battlefield.

Based on these assumptions we believe it would be helpful to consider in more detail the concept of meaningful human control to frame our discussion since it helps to “un-pack” some of the crucial questions. By doing so it allows us to think more systematically about the challenges we are facing in the technological, legal, ethical and military fields. In this context we also welcome the second UNIDIR paper that examines this concept and provides a good basis for our discussions. As mentioned this morning we also see merit in discussing aspects related to the application of legal reviews of new weapons, means and methods of warfare in relation to LAWS. Such legal reviews are crucial for ensuring that these systems are in compliance with international law.

Mr. Chairman,

The fact that we are dealing with an emerging issue, and that many systems that would cause concerns have not yet been developed, should not prevent us from having a genuine discussion about LAWS. The uncertainty, however, calls for considerate steps, which are evidence- rather than emotion-based, and that lead to the consideration of practical steps related to this topic.

I thank you and am looking forward to future deliberations.