



**CCW Meeting of Experts on Lethal Autonomous Weapons Systems
Geneva (11-15 April 2016)**

Statement by the Delegation of Italy to the Conference on Disarmament

Towards a working definition of LAWS

Mr. Chairman,

At the outset, I would like to thank the panelists for their thought-provoking and interesting presentations. I would also like to seize this opportunity to share some national views on the question of LAWS definition.

Moving towards a common understanding on how we could define LAWS is the fundamental step from which the discussion on the other elements will follow. The work conducted by this Group of Experts in 2014 and 2015 was very useful in this regard, as it allowed us to identify the main concepts that would be relevant to such a definition. Nevertheless, our task is particularly difficult, since we are dealing with an evolving reality whose borders are blurred and hard to draw.

Among the various views expressed, we are inclined to retain the notion of “meaningful human control” as an important element of our debate, that could help us to further advance our understanding. We are aware that the degree of human control on a weapons system is a variable moving along a continuous scale, which makes it difficult to establish clear-cut categories on the basis of this criterion. At the same time, we believe that we can group weapons systems based on their degree of autonomy.

Apart from systems entirely controlled by humans, we could first consider weapons systems that act on the basis of criteria pre-programmed by human operators. Such criteria determine the type of target to be selected and potentially engaged, together with the geographical area and amount of time in which the search for targets will be carried out. These systems – which have also been called “highly automated” – could be characterized by high degrees of autonomy in several functions, even some critical ones, but their behavior and actions can still be attributed to the human operator, who remains accountable.

A different group of weapons systems includes those able to make autonomous decisions based on their own learning and rules, and that can adapt to changing environments independently of any pre-programming. Such systems, which could

select targets and decide when to use force, would be entirely beyond human control.

It is our view that the first kind of weapons systems – even though they are endowed with some autonomous functions – does not fall into the concept of LAWS. Existing IHL rules already provide the parameters to assess the legality of these systems, to be determined on a case-by-case basis before and during their development, as well as at the time of their use.

There may not be any accountability gap in this case, given that the effects of these weapons could be ascribed to the human operators who decided to deploy and activate them. Obviously, people in charge of weapons deployment and activation decisions will need to take due account of the environment in which they would operate.

We do see, however, merit in exchanging views and experiences, which could lead to the collection of best practices, also in the form of guidelines, aiming to provide indications to interested countries on how to make the development and use of these systems consistent with IHL.

On the other hand, we believe that the second group of weapons systems – which would be entirely beyond human control – fall into the concept of LAWS.

We cannot exclude that those systems – in particular offensive ones – may pose issues of compliance with IHL and raise ethical dilemmas. However, we believe that existing IHL rules already provide relevant parameters to assess the legality also of this second group of weapons.

At present, as far as we know, these lethal autonomous systems do not yet exist. However, their development in the future cannot be ruled out. For this reason, we consider it very valuable to continue discussions in the framework of the CCW, allowing us to keep close attention to current developments and make relevant decisions, should the need arise.

Once again, at this stage we believe that the adoption of a total ban or other kinds of general limitations on fully autonomous technologies would be premature, given that the field is in constant, dynamic evolution and that such restrictions would hinder the development of technologies with very useful civilian applications.

Thank you, Mr. Chairman