

Statement by Mines Action Canada

CCW, April 12, 2016

Delivered by Paul Hannon, Executive Director

Opening Statement

Thank you, Chairperson. I appreciate the opportunity to speak on behalf of Mines Action Canada. Mines Action Canada is a Canadian disarmament organization that has been working to reduce the humanitarian impact of indiscriminate weapons for over twenty years. During this time, we have worked with partners around the world including here at the CCW to respond to the global crisis caused by landmines, cluster munitions, and other indiscriminate weapons. What makes this issue different is we have an opportunity to act now before a weapon causes a humanitarian catastrophe.

As a co-founder of the Campaign to Stop Killer Robots, Mines Action Canada's concern with the development of autonomous weapons systems runs across the board. We have numerous legal, moral/ethical, technical, operational, political, and humanitarian concerns about autonomous weapons systems. The question of the acceptability of delegating death is not an abstract thought experiment, but is the fundamental question with policy, legal and technological implications for the real-world. We must all keep this question at the fore whenever discussing autonomous weapons systems: do you want to live in a world where algorithms or machines can make the decision to take a life? War is a human activity and removing the human component in war is dangerous for everybody. We strongly support the position of the Campaign to Stop Killer Robots that permitting machines to take a human life on the battlefield or in policing, border or crowd control, and other circumstances is unacceptable.

We have watched the development of discourse surrounding autonomous weapons systems since the beginning of the campaign. 2015 saw a dramatic expansion of the debate into different forums and segments of our global community and that expansion and the support it has generated have continued into 2016. Be it at artificial intelligence conferences, the World Economic Forum, the Halifax Security Forum or in the media, the call for a pre-emptive ban is reaching new audiences. The momentum towards a pre-emptive ban on autonomous weapons systems is clearly growing.

Mines Action Canada recognizes that there are considerable challenges facing the international community in navigating legal issues concerning an emerging technology. The desire to not hinder research and development into potentially beneficial technologies is understandable, but a pre-emptive ban on autonomous weapons systems will not limit beneficial research. As a senior executive from a robotics company representative told us at a workshop on autonomous weapons last week, there are no other applications for an autonomous system which can make a "kill or not kill" decision. The function providing an autonomous weapon the ability to make the "kill decision" and implement it does not have an equivalent civilian use. A pre-emptive ban would have no impact on the funding of research and development for artificial intelligence nor robotics.

On the other hand there are numerous other applications that would benefit society by improving other aspects of robot weapons while maintaining meaningful human control over the decision to cause harm. Communications technology, encryption, virtual reality, sensor technology - all have much broader and beneficial applications, from search and rescue by first responders to watching a school play when you

can't be there in person. None of that research and development would be hindered by a pre-emptive ban on autonomous weapons systems. A pre-emptive ban would though allow governments, private sector and academics to direct investments towards technologies which can have as much future benefit to non-military uses as possible.

While the "kill decision" function is only necessary for one application of robotic technology, predictability is an important requirement for all robots regardless of the context in which they are used. Manufacturing robots work well because they work in a predictable space. Driverless cars will also work in a predictable space though much less predictable than a factory, which is one of the reasons they require so much more testing and time to develop. Robotic weapons will be required to work in the least predictable of spaces, that is in combat and, therefore, are much more prone to failure. Commanders on the other hand need weapons they can rely on. Civilians need and have a right to expect that every effort is taken to protect them from the harmful effects of conflict.

Mines Action Canada appreciates the significant number of expert presentations scheduled for this week but we hope that states will take time to share their views throughout the week. It is time for states to begin to talk about their concerns, their positions and their policies. For this reason, we are calling on the High Contracting Parties to take the next step later this year at the Review Conference and mandate a GGE with a mandate to negotiate a new protocol on autonomous weapons.

We note that in the last 20 years three new legal instruments have entered into force. Each bans a weapon system and each was covered by the general rules of International Humanitarian Law at the time, but the international community felt that new specific laws banning these weapons was warranted. This not only strengthened the protection of civilians, but also made IHL more robust.

Autonomous weapons systems are not your average new weapon; they have the potential to fundamentally alter the nature of conflict. As a "game-changer" autonomous weapons systems deserve a serious and in-depth discussion. That discussion should also happen at the national level. Mines Action Canada hopes that our country will begin that effort this spring through the recently announced defense review and that other states will follow suit with their own national discussions..

At the core of this work is a desire to protect civilians and limit the humanitarian harm caused by armed conflict. We urge states not to lose sight of the end goal and their motivations as they complete the difficult work necessary for a robust and effective pre-emptive ban.

Thank you.