

Statement by Human Rights Watch
To the Convention on Conventional Weapons
Informal Meeting of Experts on Lethal Autonomous Weapons Systems
May 13, 2014
Delivered by Steve Goose, Director, Arms Division

Thank you for the floor Mr. Ambassador.

Human Rights Watch is one of the founders of the Campaign to Stop Killer Robots, and Mary Wareham of Human Rights Watch is the global coordinator of the Campaign.

We welcome discussions on fully autonomous weapons in any forum, and we hope, for example, that there will continue to be work on this issue in the Human Rights Council.

But, Mr. Ambassador, this is a great day for the CCW. We hope that this will be the beginning of a momentous process that will have far-reaching humanitarian impact. You are grappling with the future of warfare, and, we trust, you are trying to ensure maximum protections for civilians.

While there is no doubt that greater autonomy can have military, and even humanitarian, advantages, it is the belief of Human Rights Watch and many others, that full autonomy is a step too far. Fully autonomous weapons would cross a fundamental moral and ethical line by ceding life and death decisions on the battlefield to machines. It is also our assessment that it is highly unlikely that fully autonomous weapons would be capable of complying with the principles of international humanitarian law. There are also serious technical and proliferation concerns. We are convinced that these weapons would pose grave dangers to civilians – and to soldiers – in the future.

Taken together, this multitude of concerns has led to the call for a preemptive prohibition on fully autonomous weapon systems. In fact, this would not just be a new weapon, but a new method of warfare, one that should never come into existence. There must always be meaningful human control over targeting and kill decisions.

Some who have spoken against our call for a preemptive ban have insisted that existing international humanitarian law would be sufficient. But if existing IHL is sufficient to address all problematic weapons, there would be no need for the CCW to exist. When a weapon is objectionable not just because of misuse, but because of its very nature, then additional and specific international law is warranted. That was the case of cluster munitions, antipersonnel

mines, blinding lasers, chemical weapons, biological weapons, and poison gas, and it should be the case for fully autonomous weapons.

We appreciated the extensive exchange of views this morning, and especially that not a single state spoke of the military necessity of acquiring fully autonomous weapons, many spoke of the multitude of problems associated with them, and a handful echoed our call for a preemptive prohibition.

The key to success this week will be the beginning of the emergence of a consensus that there should always be meaningful human control of the targeting and kill decisions in any individual attack on other humans. The determination of the meaning and nature of “meaningful human control” is perfectly suited to CCW expert work.

Before closing, I would like to inform delegates that Human Rights Watch released a new report yesterday, “Shaking the Foundations: The Human Rights Implications of Killer Robots.” It is the first report to assess in detail the potential risks posed by these weapons during law enforcement operations, expanding the debate beyond the battlefield. We found that fully autonomous weapons would threaten the most fundamental rights and principles under international law, including the right to life, right to a remedy, and the principle of human dignity.

Mr. Ambassador, we hope that this week will lay the groundwork for states to come back in November and agree to an expanded, more extensive mandate, creating a formal Group of Governmental Experts with multiple weeks of work – and to undertake this work with a view to future negotiations, leading to a preemptive prohibition on fully autonomous weapons.

This is a chance to fulfill the very purpose of CCW: to address weapons of humanitarian concern. This is a chance for the CCW to demonstrate its relevance and vitality. It is a chance for CCW states parties to show vision, as they did in preemptively banning blinding lasers. Today should be the start of something big, and we look forward to working closely with you throughout the process.

Thank you.