SPEECH FOR THE MEETING OF HIGH CONTRACTING PARTIES TO
THE CONVENTION ON PROHIBITIONS OR RESTRICTIONS ON
THE USE OF CERTAIN CONVENTIONAL WEAPONS WHICH MAY BE
DEEMED TO BE EXCESSIVELY INJURIOUS OR TO HAVE
INDISCRIMINATE EFFECTS (CCW): 12-13 NOVEMBER 2015

Mr. Chairman,

Although Zimbabwe is not yet party to the Convention on Conventional
Weapons (CCW), my delegation welcomes this opportunity to participate
in the debate on the issues at hand. We hope that our participation will
advance the current discussions, especially on “lethal autonomous
weapons systems” or LAWS.

Earlier this year in April we listened and followed from the side-lines, when
many delegations and experts engaged in a very stimulating exchange of
views on the weaponization of increasingly autonomous technologies, and
the deployment of such technologies in combat situations.

Chair,

As we celebrate the many peaceful or civilian benefits that automation
and technology brings into our lives, my delegation is equally concerned
by the development of lethal autonomous weapons systems and their
eventual deployment to engage in military combat to destroy human life.

In situations where autonomous weapon systems are deployed to select
and engage human targets in armed conflict, my delegation holds the
view that there is need to maintain meaningful human control to ensure full observance of international humanitarian law.

In so far as fully automated weapon systems do not respond to a number of our concerns and questions, we prefer to err on the side of caution.

Clearly, humanity has not evolved to such a stage where it is acceptable that the decision to take life in a war situation is made by a machine? In fact we hope that time never comes. A time when fully automated machines will be deployed in war and determine their targets. For we ask, how will these systems determine their targets? Who will be accountable for violations of international humanitarian law? Who will be criminally liable for war crimes, where such crimes are committed by fully automated machines? Of course one could argue that overall responsibility lies with the military commanders who make the decisions to deploy such weapons. However, this is a whole new and complex area that we are entering, which will be very difficult to fathom as far as international humanitarian law is concerned. Consider that, unmanned aerial military vehicles, more commonly referred to as ‘drones’, which are remotely controlled by human operators, are already wreaking havoc on civilians and the environment. Thus completely autonomous weapon systems can only be much worse on the accountability scales.

These are, some among the many questions for which we have no answers. In the absence of such answers, my delegation is of the view that we should maintain meaningful human control over military weapons or weapons with a dual use.
Until we get satisfactory answers to these ethical, moral and legal questions, we will remain uncomfortable with the potential scenario where decisions over human life and death are ceded or delegated to machines however artificially intelligent, which have neither feelings, human judgment, nor empathy and which have no sense of proportionality or force and distinction between military and civilian targets.

Chair,

We cannot pretend that lethal autonomous weapons systems are still too far way into the future for the current generations to be concerned about them. Nor can we ignore the impact that remotely controlled weapons such as drones are having on innocent civilians in the countries where they are deployed. We think that this debate is useful if it helps to educate, inform and galvanise public and international opinion against the deployment and use of such weapons in armed conflict.

We have been caught napping before, and if past experience can be our guide for the present and future, we join like-minded delegations in calling for a pre-emptive ban on lethal autonomous weapons systems. My delegation believes the time to act on this issue is now and that it is imperative to avoid a situation where a pre-emptive ban becomes a moot point.

Finally Chair, in taking the stance to ban the production and use of LAWS, my delegation is of course under no illusion that those amongst us who already enjoy a distinct advantage in terms of the deployment of such
military assets will readily give up such an advantage. We, however, see both merit and wisdom in doing what is right and necessary to safeguard this and future generations from the wanton and mindless ravages that lethal autonomous weapons systems can bring upon humanity.

I thank you.