

**HUMAN RIGHTS WATCH STATEMENT ON  
MEANINGFUL HUMAN CONTROL IN LETHAL AUTONOMOUS WEAPONS  
SYSTEMS**

**CCW Group of Governmental Experts on LAWS**

**Delivered by Bonnie Docherty  
Human Rights Watch**

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Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

While states still need to resolve differences about the way forward, during the first three days of the 2018 GGE, consensus has already started to emerge on a fundamental principle. Virtually all states have expressed the position that human control over the use of force must be maintained. This widespread support for human control should focus future discussions and shows there is a basis on which to commence negotiations next year.

States have employed various terms to refer to this concept. Most have used the phrase “human control” although a few have mentioned human intervention or judgment. To emphasize that control should not be illusory, some states have added a qualifier, such as meaningful, effective, or appropriate. Human Rights Watch believes that the strongest formulation is “meaningful human control,” but regardless of the wording, there is clear evidence of a shared recognition that humans must be substantially involved in decisions about the application of force.

Requiring meaningful human control over the selection and engagement of targets would address many of the concerns around fully autonomous weapons.

Allowing innate human qualities to inform the use of force is a moral imperative. Weapons systems do not possess compassion and empathy, key checks on the killing of civilians. Furthermore, as inanimate objects, machines cannot truly appreciate the value of human life and thus delegating life-and-death decisions to machines undermines the dignity of their victims.

Human control also promotes compliance with international law. For example, human judgment is essential to correctly balance civilian harm and military advantage and comply with international humanitarian law’s proportionality test. Machines cannot be pre-programmed to respond appropriately to all of the complex scenarios they may face.

Human judgment is similarly essential to upholding the right to life. Avoiding the arbitrary taking of life requires ensuring that the use of force is necessary and proportional in specific situations.

Finally, humans should retain control over the selection and engagement of targets in individual attacks because it promotes accountability for unlawful harm. It would be legally difficult and often unfair to hold a human responsible for the unforeseeable actions of an autonomous robot.

Several states have argued this week that the GGE's discussions should focus on weapons systems that raise ethical, legal, and other concerns. The Convention on Conventional Weapons, after all, is a framework for prohibiting or regulating the use of inhumane and indiscriminate weapons.

Human Rights Watch supports that position. States should not become distracted by lengthy discussions of acceptable technology. Instead, they should understand LAWS as a category of problematic weapons that require legal restrictions. Judging by the GGE's discussions so far, that category of weapons should be characterized by its lack of meaningful human control.

In conclusion, Human Rights Watch calls on states party to the CCW to require meaningful human control over the selection and engagement of targets. The negotiation and adoption of a legally binding instrument that preemptively prohibits weapons lacking such control is a logical and effective way to achieve that goal.

Thank you.