

CCW Meeting of Experts on Lethal Autonomous Weapons Systems  
13-16 May 2014

General Statement by Norway

Thank you Mr. Chair,

Let me first say that Norway appreciates this opportunity to discuss the dilemmas raised by the development of increasingly autonomous weapons system, and that we look forward to the expert presentations this week.

First of all, let me underline that there are a number of weapons systems already in use that are highly automatic, but which operate within such tightly constrained spatial and temporal limits that meaningful human control is ensured. While all weapons systems must be used in a manner consistent with international law, including international human rights and humanitarian law, it is not our intention to address such weapons types in this particular context.

By fully autonomous weapons systems in this context I refer to weapons systems that search for, identify and use lethal force to attack targets, including human beings, without a human operator intervening, and without meaningful human control.

The possible development of such "fully autonomous weapons" raises a number of ethical and legal questions. This week's discussions is a good opportunity for States and other stakeholders to reflect on some of these questions.

At this stage, our main concern with the possible development of fully autonomous weapons systems is whether such weapons could be programmed to operate within the limitations set by international law. Including in particular with regard to the fundamental rules on distinction and proportionality.

International humanitarian law requires that the parties to an armed conflict distinguish between those persons who take an active part in hostilities and those who do not. Attacks directed against civilians not taking an active part in hostilities, or against wounded combatants

who are not able to defend themselves, or against combatants trying to surrender, or other groups of protected persons, are prohibited by IHL. Could a fully autonomous weapons system be designed to tell if a soldier is trying to surrender, or to distinguish between a combatant and a civilian?

Before launching an attack, a military commander is also required to make a proportionality assessment between the incidental harm which the attack may be expected to cause, and consider it against the military advantage anticipated. Launching an attack which may be expected to cause excessive incidental loss of civilian life or civilian objects is prohibited and must be halted or cancelled. An important question, is therefore whether a fully autonomous weapons could be programmed to make such a complicated analysis and judgement without human intervention?

Furthermore, I would like to underline that ensuring individual and state responsibility for unlawful acts in times of armed conflict is a cornerstone of modern international law. Without accountability, deterring and preventing international crimes becomes all the much harder.

One possible challenge with fully autonomous weapons is that they could blur lines of responsibility and accountability. Robots would obviously be precluded from any moral and legal accountability. Considering the very limited role played by humans in operating these systems, it is possible to foresee situations in which no one could be held responsible where such weapons were to be used to violate international law. This potential accountability gap could have very serious consequences and erode the substantial progress that has been achieved in this area over the last few years.

These are only a few of the questions raised by the possible development and use of fully autonomous weapons. As new weapons technology continues to be developed in this area, we believe that it is necessary to ensure that the basic rules and principles of international law are upheld.

Mr. Chair

Noting the excellent contributions women have made – and are making – in the field of disarmament, arms control, international law, robotics and military affairs, we were disappointed to see that there are few – if any – women among the presenters at this expert meeting.

As the Security Council recognised almost fifteen years ago, with the adoption of Resolution 1325, women make important contributions to peace and security. Their contributions are valuable, and we are pleased to see an impressive line-up of very capable women at the side-events organised this week by the Campaign to Stop Killer Robots.

Thank you.

