

CCW Group of Governmental Experts on Lethal Autonomous Weapons Systems (LAWS)

13-17 November 2017

General statement by Norway

CHECK AGAINST DELIVERY

Mr. Chairperson,

Since it is the first time that Norway takes the floor, we would like to express our appreciation to you, Ambassador Gill, for your efforts in leading these discussions and for the useful food-for-thought paper circulated in advance of this meeting.

Development and use of weapons systems that, once activated, may selected and engage targets without further human intervention, raises a number of complex legal and ethical questions.

Norway has not yet concluded on a specific legal definition of the term ‘fully autonomous weapons systems’. Generally speaking, however, in using the term, we refer to weapons that would search for, identify and attack targets, including human beings, using lethal force without any human operator intervening. These must be distinguished from weapons systems already in use that are highly automatic, but which operate within such tightly constrained spatial and temporal limits that they fall outside the category of ‘fully autonomous weapons’.

We are still in the process of gathering information about the range of implications that such weapons systems would have were they to be developed and employed in armed conflict.

As a fundamental starting point, however, all weapons systems must be able to be used in a manner consistent with international law, including international humanitarian law and human rights law. Among the key concerns is whether it is possible to use fully autonomous weapons in compliance with international humanitarian law, in particular with regard to the fundamental rules on distinction, proportionality and precaution.

Many of the core rules of IHL presume the application of human judgement in the decision-making process. In addition to the ethical concerns raised by such weapons making targeting decisions, we find it difficult to envisage how fully autonomous weapons may be designed to do so within the limitations set by IHL.

Another challenge with such weapons would be ensuring individual and state responsibility for unlawful acts in times of armed conflict. This is a cornerstone of modern international law. Without accountability, deterring and preventing international crimes becomes all that much harder. A robot or an algorithm is obviously precluded from any moral and legal accountability. Considering the limited role that humans may have in operating these systems, it is easy to foresee situations in which no one can be held responsible if fully autonomous weapons are used in violation of international law. This potential accountability gap can have very serious consequences and erode the substantial progress that has been achieved in this area over the last few years.

Mr. Chairperson,

Norway welcomes the proposals submitted to this meeting on how to address the emergence of fully autonomous weapons systems. We are looking forward to continuing the discussion on the various approaches and options for the way forward in the days to come.

Thank you.