

Human Rights Watch

Statement to Convention on Conventional Weapons GGE meeting on lethal autonomous weapons system

By Mary Wareham, Advocacy Director, Arms Division

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Thank you, Chair.

As a co-founder of the Stop Killer Robots campaign, Human Rights Watch fully supports its call for countries to adopt a legally-binding instrument on autonomy in weapon systems.

Lethal autonomous weapons systems would select and engage targets based on sensor processing rather than human inputs. As others have noted, they raise a host of ethical, humanitarian, legal, moral, operational, proliferation, and security risks that have been thoroughly explored here at the Convention on Conventional Weapons [\(CCW\)](#) and outside it over the past nine years.

Like previous speakers Human Rights Watch welcomes the Belén [Communiqué](#) endorsed by nearly every country in Latin America and the Caribbean last month and its clear call for countries to “collaborate to promote the urgent negotiation of an international legally binding instrument, with prohibitions and regulations with regard to autonomy in weapons systems.”

The communiqué echoes the broad support that has been voiced for new legal rules to address grave concerns over removing human control from the use of force. Such an international treaty should prohibit autonomous weapons systems that inherently lack meaningful human control. It should ban autonomous weapons systems that target people, as the working papers from Austria and the State of Palestine also recommend. It should contain positive obligations to ensure meaningful human control in other weapons systems that have elements of autonomy.

Mr. Chair, the Belén Communiqué is the third joint statement on this topic to be issued in the weeks leading up to this meeting, and it is significantly stronger than its counterparts.

The United States [unveiled](#) a proposed political declaration on February 16 that seeks to ensure responsible use of weapons systems that incorporate artificial intelligence (AI) capabilities. The Netherlands issued a [“call to action”](#) on that same day urging “responsible use of AI in the military domain.”

We’re disappointed that the Dutch and U.S. initiatives fail to address the need to regulate autonomy in weapons systems through the adoption of new international law. The Dutch and U.S. statements instead accept continued development and acquisition of autonomous weapons systems so long as doing so complies with existing law, processes, and ethical principles. Instead of creating adequate controls on the development of autonomous weapons, we fear that the Dutch and U.S. initiatives could facilitate even greater investments in these weapons.

Voluntary measures, such as codes of conduct, clarifications of how existing IHL applies, and non-binding principles, may appeal to countries that oppose negotiating new law but who want to appear as though they are “doing something.” However, in our view they only pave the way for a more uncertain and dangerous future of automated killing. We agree with those who have called such measures “inadequate” and inappropriate.

The challenge before us is how to achieve new international law to address this concern. This morning we heard the UN disarmament chief express frustration at the “stagnation” of these talks. Indeed, the CCW has provided a convenient talk shop, but it has shown repeatedly that it is incapable of producing a credible outcome. Given the complete lack of substantive progress in recent years we cannot understand why some still regard the CCW as an appropriate forum for dealing with this issue, let alone “the” appropriate forum.

To make progress an alternative forum must be found. It is time to leave the CCW for another forum that can aim higher, move faster, be bolder, and be more inclusive of countries that are not part of the CCW as well as of civil society. Ample precedents from the past 25 years show how – with political will and voting-based decision-making – like-minded countries can negotiate and adopt strong international treaties outside of the CCW in 15 months or less.

At the beginning of this year, UN Secretary-General António Guterres warned that “technology is not moving incrementally” and neither should efforts to regulate and prevent the harm that may be caused. He again [called](#) for internationally agreed limits on autonomous weapons systems.

Autonomous weapons systems will impact any country in the world so clear, strong, and global legally-binding rules could not be more important or urgent. Let’s get started. We are ready.

Thank you.