Submission to the UN Secretary-General by the Future of Life Institute

The Future of Life Institute (FLI) is a global nonprofit working primarily on the governance of emerging technology. The organisation is the UN Secretary-General civil society co-champion for Artificial Intelligence under the UN’s Digital Roadmap and is best known for developing the Asilomar AI principles. FLI has long promoted governance of autonomous weapons systems (AWS) since the organisation’s founding. FLI is recently most known for having published an open letter, signed by over a thousand leading AI researchers, that sparked a global public debate on the development of advanced artificial intelligence.

Autonomous weapons systems are ethically wrong: machines and algorithms should not make life and death decisions. It is unclear who can be held accountable for potential war crimes, extrajudicial killings, and unlawful use. AWS present tremendous global security risks: they raise the risk of unintended escalation and flash wars and lower the threshold for war. They can proliferate in the wrong hands. They could be used as weapons of mass destruction (swarms), for targeted killings, and can create instability leading to an increased likelihood of nuclear weapons being used.

Over 115 states explicitly back new binding international law. FLI strongly supports the UN Secretary-General and International Committee of the Red Cross’ (ICRC) urgent call for states to adopt a legal treaty to prohibit and regulate autonomous weapons systems by 2026. We call upon states to commence treaty negotiations as soon as possible.

FLI, in line with the ICRC’s recommendations for a legally binding instrument, supports a two-tier approach, including:

- Prohibitions on unpredictable autonomous weapons systems and anti-personnel autonomous weapons systems.
- Positive obligations towards all other autonomous weapons to ensure the maintenance of meaningful human control, including measures such as:
  - Restricting targets of the AWS to only those which are military objectives by nature.
  - Limiting the location where, time that and situation in which the AWS is operating, including to avoid concentrations of civilians or civilian objects.
  - Limiting the number of engagements that the AWS can undertake.
  - Ensuring, to the maximum extent feasible, the ability for a human user to effectively supervise, and to, in a timely manner, intervene, and, where appropriate, deactivate operation of the AWS.