The Republic of Kiribati’s
Submission to the Secretary-General in accordance with
UNGA Resolution 78/241 entitled Lethal Autonomous Weapons Systems
24 May 2024

Overview

1. Kiribati welcomes the opportunity to submit its views for consideration by the United Nations Secretary-General, in accordance with Resolution A/Res78/241 entitled “Lethal autonomous weapons systems,” adopted by the General Assembly on 22 December 2023, which requested the Secretary-General to seek views on “ways to address the related challenges and concerns [that autonomous weapon systems] raise from humanitarian, legal, security, technological and ethical perspectives and on the role of humans in the use of force.”

2. Kiribati is a small island State in the Pacific region, a peaceful region that is not a major producer of autonomous weapons. Nevertheless, Kiribati remains highly concerned about the presence of autonomous weapons and their ability to cause grave harm to both the environment and civilians, especially related to the nexus between nuclear weapons and autonomous weapons.

Nuclear Dimension

3. Between 1957 and 1962, the Republic of Kiribati experienced 33 nuclear weapons tests on both Malden and Kiritimati Islands. As a result, we are alarmed about the potential use of autonomous systems in nuclear decisions as echoed in numerous recent publications.

4. We also recall with alarm popular films where autonomous machines launch nuclear strikes. We must avoid any situation where nuclear-armed states enable autonomous machines to control their nuclear weapons. Thus, we demand the nuclear-armed states to never allow Autonomous Weapon Systems to control their command-and-control systems and ban nuclear weapons.

Co-Sponsorship of Austria’s Resolution

5. Against this backdrop, Kiribati sponsored Austria’s resolution on lethal autonomous weapon systems at the UN General Assembly’s First Committee.
Our Attendance at Humanity at the Crossroads Conference in Vienna

6. At the Humanity at the Crossroads conference, we listened closely to experts, academia, civil society, and the ICRC on autonomous weapon systems. In this regard, we fully agree with the Chair’s Summary that “Autonomous Weapons Systems (AWS), which - once activated - select targets and apply force without further human intervention, raise concerns from legal, ethical and security perspectives.” Thus, we fully endorse the Chair’s summary.

Request for a Prohibition on Autonomous Weapons Systems

7. Due to our shared concerns about Autonomous Weapons Systems, we are calling for a new legally binding treaty to prohibit these weapons. Our position is based on the general views amongst regional states, as reflected in both the Freetown Communique (from ECOWAS), Belén Communiqué (from the Latin American and Caribbean states), and the Port of Spain Declaration (from CARICOM).

8. This treaty could either be negotiated within the auspices of the UNGA or among the parties of the CCM.

Incorporating International Law

9. A new legally binding instrument should underscore the need for All States to comply at all times with international law, including international humanitarian law, international human rights law, and the UN Charter.

Defining An Autonomous Weapon System

10. This new treaty should contain an unambiguous definition of what constitutes an autonomous weapon system. In this regard, we agree with the International Committee of the Red Cross that an autonomous weapon system means “a weapon system that is designed to select and engage one or more targets without the need for human intervention after activation.”

11. The phrase “without the need for humanitarian intervention” can be expanded upon. As explained by the ICRC, this phrase could be defined as follows:

After initial activation by a human, the application of force is triggered in response to information from the environment received through sensors measuring phenomena such as heat, light, movement, shape, velocity, weight or acoustic or electromagnetic signals; and on the basis of a generalized “target profile” such as the shape, infrared or radar “signature”, speed and direction of a type of military vehicle, etc.16 “Human intervention”, for these purposes, should be understood as excluding human inputs or actions that do not materially affect the autonomous functions of target selection or engagement.
Prohibitions

12. Kiribati strongly endorses the ICRC’s perspectives that a new and legally binding treaty should contain the following prohibitions:

- development, produce, otherwise acquire, stockpile or retain, or transfer, directly or indirectly to anyone, or to use any autonomous weapon system that is designed or of a nature, or used in such a manner that does not allow a human user to both (1) understand, predict and explain how the AWS will function in any normal or expected circumstances of use, in particular what circumstances or conditions will trigger the system to apply force, and (2) predict and limit the effects of the AWS in all such circumstances as required by IHL.

13. Kiribati also agrees that the instrument should ban anti-personnel autonomous weapon systems. Specifically, as explained by the ICRC, the instrument should:

- Prohibit in all circumstances to develop, produce, otherwise acquire, stockpile, or retain, or transfer, directly or indirectly to anyone, or to use any autonomous weapon system: - that is designed or used in such a manner to be triggered by the presence, proximity or contact of one or more persons, or - the target profile of which otherwise represents one or more persons.

Inclusivity

14. If the international community initiates negotiations on a new treaty to ban autonomous weapon systems, it is vital that we invite representatives of academia, civil society, religious communities, and youth to share their input and perspectives. They can bring fresh ideas to the States, and we must encourage them to contribute to provide their views.

Conclusion

15. Given the current geopolitical situations across the world, we must safeguard the lives of civilians. We cannot have uncontrorollable weapons, which can cause indiscriminate harm and cannot differentiate between civilians and non-civilians. As a result, the treaty should address a series of prohibitions that include autonomous weapons, which have artificial intelligence and hinder human users from understanding and predicting the systems’ behaviors.

16. We cannot allow any type of weapon that can potentially harm civilians.