Submission on Autonomous Weapon Systems to the United Nations Secretary General

Sustainable Peace and Development Organization (SPADO) welcomes the opportunity to submit views to the United Nations Secretary-General in response to Resolution 78/241. SPADO is a civil society organization based in Pakistan and is a member of the Campaign to Stop Killer Robots. The organization has actively and productively participated in the discussions on LAWS at the CCW and other such forums. We are committed to raise awareness and advocate for a legally binding instrument on autonomous weapons keeping in view its ethical, humanitarian, moral, legal and security concerns.

The submission outlines our views on the serious and unimaginable implications of autonomous weapons in the context of preserving our shared humanity, global peace and security, accountability and transparency and the urgency to initiate negotiations for a legally binding instrument that prohibit and regulate autonomous weapons without further delay.

Preserving our Shared Humanity:

The debate over killer robots extends far beyond mere questions of national security or ethical principles; it speaks to the very essence of our shared humanity. Allowing machines to arbitrate who lives and who dies risks dismantling the fundamental foundations of our society, relegating empathy and compassion to mere trace of our past. The development of lethal autonomous weapons contradicts the ethical principles and teachings of all faiths which call for compassion, human judgment, and the preservation of life. The development and use of LAWS will lead to actions that contravene the moral values and principles enshrined in our faiths as one human family. This is a question of our shared humanity, which is at stake and that of the preservation of human dignity.

Pope Francis has urged world leaders to establish an international treaty regulating AI, and warned against relying on machines to make moral and ethical decisions that should be left to humans. The most dangerous risk, however, lies in the military development of autonomous weapons. Pope Francis argued that the technology could never be "morally responsible subjects" and warned it could fall into the wrong hands and wreak havoc – potentially killing innocent citizens and upending democracies.2

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1 Stop Killer Robots is a coalition of more than 250 non-governmental organizations and academic partners working across 70 countries towards an international treaty on autonomous weapons systems that ensures meaningful human control over the use of force and rejects the automation of killing.

2 See https://www.theregister.com/2023/12/15/pope_francis_ai_treaty/
Global Peace and Security:

We have to look at the issue of autonomous weapons more broadly in the context of global peace and our shared humanity. If one country for instance develops and deploy autonomous weapons then it is for sure that other states will follow and a new arms race in the area of LAWS will emerge. The race will not stop and most probably the Non-State Actors will be in a position to develop and deploy such weapons if not in the near future but for sure in future. Such an arms race will be uncontrollable and unimaginable. We believe that prevention is better than cure and today, we have the time to prevent such an unethical arms race. The arms race will be like the COVID-19 Pandemic, which originated from one location and then affected the whole global community irrespective of race and region whether developed, developing or under developed. Now is the time to stop the future pandemic of LAWS.

The world has already become quite polarized where there is a lack of trust and mutual respect and understanding among states. The brutal wars are underway where parties to the conflict are using every form of lethal force. We are witnessing humanitarian catastrophe and the killing of innocent civilians including women and children on daily basis. In the midst of these conflicts certain states are increasingly investing in autonomous weapons and it is unclear to what extent such weapons have been deployed or used. If the use of such weapons becomes more evident than the already started race in the area of LAWS will become so fast, which will be uncontrollable. Such proliferation will be having catastrophic impacts on the international peace and security.

Accountability and Transparency:

The arguments that the use of autonomous weapons to protect civilians, target legitimate military objects and protect the armed forces raise many fundamental questions and concerns such as how will one limit the scope of the use autonomous weapons and how an autonomous weapon will be capable to identify that the target is legitimate and not a civilian object. There are higher chances that the use of such weapons will proliferate quickly and will raise many ethical and moral concerns, which will compromise the question of human dignity. Autonomous robots would lack human judgment and the ability to understand context. As a result, autonomous weapons would not meet the requirements of the laws of war. Replacing human troops with machines could make the decision to go to war easier, which would shift the burden of armed conflict further onto civilians. There are greater chances that antipersonnel autonomous weapons with deadly effects can be used by individuals against individuals based on their DNAs, facial recognition, biometric data etc. where it will be extremely difficult to find who developed and deployed such weapons.

Urgency is Needed:

States have been discussing the issue of LAWS for more than 10 years in the CCW where a large majority of member states were hoping that the discussions will lead to prohibitions and regulations of autonomous weapons. The global civil society, academia, tech experts, faith leaders and international organizations have been warning and showing their concerns related to the threats of autonomous weapons and asking for taking urgent steps towards a legally binding treaty. However, despite the large majority of states in favor of a legally binding treaty, the discussions didn’t culminate into legal prohibitions and regulations on autonomous weapons.
The resolution of Austria on autonomous weapons at the UN General Assembly and the regional conferences in Latin America, Africa and Asia have provided an opportunity to the United Nations to carry forward the discussions into concrete outcomes leading to a legally binding treaty. We believe that the Secretary General New Agenda for Peace is the best way forward to build trust, solidarity and universality, which has also proposed to conclude a legally binding treaty on autonomous weapons by 2026. SPADO is of the view that the current wars and conflicts across the world demand the United Nations to take immediate steps to build consensus among states and initiate the negotiations of a legally binding treaty on autonomous weapons.

In conclusion, we would like to emphasize that there is a dire need to collectively utilize our human wisdom and don’t just focus our attention about the present status and scenario of autonomous weapons but to imagine a devastating future scenario of automated killings where no one will be safe when such weapons will proliferate. States have the responsibility to act now as it will then be too late to stop autonomous weapons, which will eliminate human dignity, the value of life and the moral and ethical values, which the global community possess.