SafeGround welcomes the opportunity to submit its views for consideration by the United Nations Secretary-General, in relation to resolution 78/241 “Lethal autonomous weapon systems” adopted by the UN General Assembly on 22 December 2023. The resolution requests the Secretary-General to seek views of countries and other stakeholders on “ways to address the related challenges and concerns raised[d] from humanitarian, legal, security, technological and ethical perspective and on the role of humans in the use of force,” posed by autonomous weapons.

SafeGround works to reduce harms of legacy and emerging weapons through outreach and education in Australia and the Pacific and finds it essential autonomous weapons are regulated through new international law to ensure the international community responds to these concerns. This submission highlights the moral, legal and humanitarian imperatives and briefly discusses national, regional and international security considerations. The submission then presents how a legally binding instrument addresses these concerns, including outlining elements such as specific prohibitions and obligations.

(1) Our concerns of autonomous weapons systems: moral, legal, humanitarian imperatives

SafeGround first formed as part of the International Campaign to Ban Landmines, advocating a ban on anti-personnel landmines which are indiscriminate and abhorrent. Autonomous weapons, particularly used against humans, have been called ‘morally repugnant’ by the UN Secretary-General and would not comply with IHL’s three core principles of distinction, proportionality and precaution. Human judgement is essential in applying IHL and the challenges to IHL compliance are one reason why new international law should be adopted to strengthen existing understandings and set new precedents based on legal and moral concerns.

The delegation of the decision over life and death to machines is a key moral risk raised by autonomous weapons. This would cross a moral red line and, along with digital dehumanisation and concerns such as human dignity and bias present an imperative against targeting humans with autonomous weapons.

Furthermore, autonomous weapons pose new humanitarian risks, already increasing autonomy is transforming how wars are fought, and AI-enabled targeting systems used in Gaza are facilitating unprecedented speed and scale of killing. There is a humanitarian need to ensure meaningful human control is maintained over the use of any weapons systems.

(2) Security considerations

Autonomous weapons pose an acceleration of conflict and higher risk of escalation. The proliferation of these weapons, especially if unregulated, and without requirements for meaningful human control will be destabilising. The Indo-Pacific region, for instance, has complex security dynamics and tensions and maintaining meaningful human control over autonomous weapons is important to manage these security risks. Autonomous weapons have implications for arms racing and regulation is an important mechanism for establishing guardrails and delineating what is and is not acceptable.

Based on historical trends, there is also a danger of these weapons proliferating globally, being used by non-state actors, in conflict and for other criminal activities. Misuse by non-state actors, for drug trafficking, illegal fishing, and political unrest, is particularly concerning for our region. These risks are heightened for Pacific small island developing countries, many of which have no military or only small peacekeeping forces.
Autonomous weapons systems also have environmental security risks. The use of landmines, cluster munitions, chemical, biological and nuclear weapons have had hazardous consequences for the natural world and security of impacted communities. Autonomous weapons systems could exacerbate environmental degradation by reducing human oversight when selecting and engaging targets. While the energy cost of training and operating AWS is not fully known, studies indicate that the carbon footprint of AI technologies could substantially contribute to climate change. SafeGround finds it crucial to promote the responsible development and use of any weapons system that takes into account the environmental security impacts.

(3) Addressing concerns through a legally binding instrument.

SafeGround calls for the establishment of a legally binding instrument on autonomous weapons to address the legal, moral, humanitarian and security concerns. New international law is essential to establish new international norms, moral precedents, and legal clarity.

i. Prohibitions

To address these challenges, we call for the prohibition of certain autonomous weapons

- Prohibitions on weapons systems that target people
- Prohibitions on weapons systems that cannot be used with meaningful human control

ii. Regulations

Autonomous weapons should also be regulated to ensure those not prohibited are effectively controlled through obligations related to;

- Understanding the system’s functioning
- Limiting target types, context of use
- Limiting the duration, area, scope, and scale of operating

Beyond new legal rules, these limits may also include common policy standards and good practice guidance, which can be complementary and mutually reinforcing. Specific considerations should be made as to how regulatory responses can address proliferation to non-state actors, dual-use and environmental concerns and risks.

We are grateful for the opportunity to share our views and recommendations on addressing issues of autonomous weapons from a regional and civil society perspective. We must take this opportunity to take collective action with urgency, to respond effectively to this challenge to our shared humanity.