
Introduction

This is a submission by the Government of Sierra Leone in line with the UN Secretary-General’s call as outlined in Resolution 78/241 on “Lethal Autonomous Weapons Systems,” adopted by the General Assembly in December 2023. It draws from the deliberations and communiqué (hereinafter “Freetown communiqué”) of a conference of member states of Economic Community of West African States on the Peace and Security aspect of Autonomous Weapons Systems, held in Freetown, Sierra Leone, on 17-18 April 2024; and from the official statement of His Excellency President Dr. Julius Maada Bio on the urgent need for the creation of legally binding norms and principles that address the threats and challenges posed by autonomous weapons systems.

ECOWAS’ member states were represented by high-level delegations, including Ministers of Foreign Affairs, at the conference, which focused on the theme “Peace and Security Aspects of Autonomous Weapons Systems: An ECOWAS Perspective on a Path Towards the Negotiation Process of a Legally Binding Instrument.” The Government of Sierra Leone proposed to host the conference after the UN General Assembly adopted resolution 78/241 on 22 December 2023, which it had cosponsored. The resolution requested the UN Secretary General to seek the views of Member States on ways to address the related challenges and concerns they raise from humanitarian, legal, security, technological and ethical perspectives.

The Submission

Sierra Leone’s position is encapsulated in the 18 April “Freetown communiqué”. It supports the UN Secretary General’s call for urgent negotiation of a legally binding instrument to regulate AWS
in line with international laws, including humanitarian and human rights laws, as well as fundamental ethical principles governing warfare. Sierra Leone pledges to advance ECOWAS’ coordinated strategy, as emphasised by the “Freetown communiqué”, towards addressing the multifaceted challenges posed by AWS.

The Government of Sierra Leone emphasises the need to develop sub-regional accountability standards and operational frameworks for the procurement, transfer, and deployment of AWS; as well as for robust legal parameters and operational protocols that uphold international law and safeguard human rights. We place particular emphasis on the importance and urgency of building upon existing international treaties and the ongoing efforts of the United Nations to start negotiations that would lead to a legally binding instrument on AWS. Sierra Leone deplores the prospect of AWS leading to an escalation of arms race and weapons proliferation, and upending ECOWAS’s longstanding work on weapons control, conflict prevention, and disarmament processes.

Sierra Leone submits the contents of the 18 April “Freetown communiqué” to be included in the UN Secretary General’s report in line with Resolution 78/241, as both a document of the Government of Sierra Leone, and – because the conference from which it was issued was the first regional conference to attract participation from the highest levels of government, including the Head of State of Sierra Leone – as the agreed position of member states of ECOWAS on the need for a legally binding instrument on AWS. The “Freetown communiqué” stated following, which sums up this submission:

Recognizing the significant regional and global security and geopolitical implications of emerging technologies;

Recognising further that these technologies and artificial intelligence (AI), if equitably developed and shared, have the potential to support economic growth and enhance the quality of human lives;

Cognizant that without equitable development such technologies may reinforce existing social, political and economic inequalities, and may foster prejudice, distrust and digital dehumanization;

Concerned that autonomy of weapons systems raises serious ethical, humanitarian, legal, and peace and security concerns, including concerns about the potential use of autonomous weapons systems as deadly force against targets without the meaningful human control that is critical for upholding ethical, legal and humanitarian obligations;

Conscious of the history and current context of our region, in relation to the issues of armed conflict, terrorism and internal disturbances that have been exacerbated by the inadequate international regulation of arms traffic and weapons systems;

Concerned that autonomous weapons systems may become increasingly easy to replicate and easily fungible, and thereby become the object of trade and transfer, including for use by transnational criminal networks, terrorists, and other non-state armed groups;

Concerned also that such proliferation, in the absence of specific international regulation, will generate additional threats to national, regional, and global peace and security, including the risks of arms race and
of conflict escalation, and will undermine regional efforts to build peace through economic and political integration;

Recognizing, therefore, the need to strengthen existing governance mechanisms, including international humanitarian law, international human rights law, and international criminal law, by establishing new legally binding rules, with prohibitions and regulations that effectively address the threats and challenges posed by autonomous weapons systems; ECOWAS member states resolved:

- To support the urgent negotiation of a legally binding instrument to regulate autonomous weapons systems, with specific prohibitions and regulations, in accordance with international law, including international humanitarian law and international human rights law, and ethical principles; and
- To work towards strengthening regional cooperation and partnership and, through inclusive and participatory approaches, advancing common positions on autonomous weapon systems that contribute to the broader global effort towards the establishment of a new legally binding instrument;
- To promote constructive dialogue and collaboration with international organizations, civil society, academia, and other stakeholders to address the challenges posed by autonomous weapons systems effectively; and
- To endorse the process of working towards the emergence of a common regional position on autonomous weapons systems, as articulated in the communiqué adopted at this conference, and pledge to work collectively towards its implementation.

Conclusion

Sierra Leone believes that the Freetown conference and communiqué, with their emphasis on the importance of global cooperation and a unified stance on AWS regulation, set a strategic agenda for future negotiations that would lead to negotiations on a legally binding instrument on AWS. Sierra Leone hopes that the discussions and outcomes from this conference significantly influence the global conversation on AWS and contribute to the development of a legally binding international framework by 2026— a target set by the United Nations. The conference underscored the complex and urgent nature of the issues surrounding AWS and the collective responsibility of the international community to address these challenges. It acknowledged the proactive roles of Sierra Leone and ECOWAS in fostering a unified approach to enhance global security, respect for human rights, and adherence to international law.

Freetown, Sierra Leone 23 May 2024