Fully autonomous weapons (“killer robots”)
Campaign to Stop Killer Robots

Background
The last multilateral meeting to discuss concerns raised by fully autonomous weapons, also known as lethal autonomous weapon systems, was in April 2016. Since then, concerns have continued to mount over these weapons, which, once activated, would select and fire on targets without further human intervention.

States at the Convention on Conventional Weapons (CCW) should be ashamed by their failure in 2017 to discuss, let alone take action, on this urgent emerging issue of concern. They should resume work at the international level and develop national policies affirming the necessity of retaining meaningful human control of weapons systems by preemptively banning fully autonomous weapons.

States should use the first meeting of the CCW Group of Governmental Experts on lethal autonomous weapons in November 2017 to elaborate their desired outcome for these talks. They should agree to begin negotiating a new CCW protocol in 2018 to prohibit the development, production, and use of fully autonomous weapons.

Current context
In 2014–2016, approximately 80 countries discussed concerns over lethal autonomous weapons systems at three informal CCW meetings at the UN in Geneva together with key UN agencies, the International Committee of the Red Cross, and the Campaign to Stop Killer Robots. These meetings helped increase awareness and understanding of the ethical, legal, operational, proliferation, technical, and other challenges posed by these weapons. Permitting machines to take a human life on the battlefield or in policing, border control, and other circumstances is a moral line that should never be crossed.

Since 2013, 19 countries have endorsed the call to ban fully autonomous weapons and dozens more have affirmed the importance of retaining meaningful or appropriate or adequate human control over critical combat functions.

At their Fifth Review Conference in December 2016, CCW states agreed to formalise their deliberations on lethal autonomous weapons systems by establishing a Group of Governmental Experts (GGE) to meet twice in 2017. At the time the Campaign to Stop Killer Robots welcomed this incremental step, which it said demonstrated progress by moving the deliberations to the next level, dedicating more time for substantive discussions, and raising the expectation of an outcome. Past GGEs have led to negotiations of new CCW protocols.
Yet the GGE still has not convened, ostensibly due to financial challenges stemming from the failure of key states, most notably Brazil, to pay their outstanding CCW dues. The first GGE meeting scheduled for April 2017 was postponed until August. The rescheduled meeting that was supposed to open on 21 August was cancelled. A November meeting of the GGE is going ahead, but its chair Ambassador Amandeep Singh Gill of India now faces the enormous task of somehow covering the long-list of topics that the GGE is supposed to discuss over a matter of days as well as ensure substantive deliberations on the options for future action that the GGE is supposed to investigate.

Rather than be embarrassed, CCW states should be emboldened by the call to action on fully autonomous weapons issued on 21 August 2017 by 116 founders of artificial intelligence and robotics companies. The private sector letter describes their serious concerns that fully autonomous weapons could proliferate and fall into the hands of dictators and terrorists. It warns these weapons could be hacked and demands preventative action by the CCW “to protect us all”.

The CCW process on lethal autonomous weapon systems could and should result in a new CCW protocol banning these weapons, but it should not take years to do so. A long, drawn-out process that achieves a weak or no result must be avoided. If the CCW continues its poor record of inaction this year on lethal autonomous weapon systems then states serious about protecting civilians should look at other routes to conclude a ban outside the CCW in another forum.

Recommendations

During First Committee, delegations should:
• Articulate their national policy on fully autonomous weapons, including their position on the calls for a ban; and
• Elaborate their desired outcome for the CCW Group of Governmental Experts and express their intent to contribute substantively in its deliberations.

Beyond First Committee, states should:
• Participate substantively in the CCW Group of Governmental Experts meeting on lethal autonomous weapons systems on 13–17 November 2017, which is open to all states regardless of whether they have ratified the CCW;
• Pursue agreement on a revised mandate at the CCW’s annual meeting on 22–24 November 2017 that continues the GGE with a specific mandate to meet for at least four weeks in 2018 to negotiate a new CCW protocol on lethal autonomous weapons systems; and
• Develop formal national policies and national legislation that explicitly ban these weapons.

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