Thank you Mr. Chair.

The last multilateral meeting held at the UN 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 future weapons, that, once activated, would select and fire on targets without meaningful human control. Meanwhile funds continue to be invested in the development of weapons systems with decreasing levels of human control in the US as well as in China, Israel, South Korea, Russia, the UK, and elsewhere.

In 2014–2016, approximately 80 countries attended three informal CCW meetings on lethal autonomous weapons systems 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, human rights, legal, operational, proliferation, technical, and other challenges posed by these weapons.

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. We welcomed this incremental step, which we said demonstrated progress by moving the deliberations to the next level and raising the expectation of an outcome because past GGEs have led to the negotiation of draft CCW protocols.

Yet 2017 has been a lost year thus far for efforts to address fully autonomous weapons in the CCW. The Group of Governmental Experts still has not convened, ostensibly due to financial challenges stemming from the failure of key states to pay their outstanding CCW dues. The GGE is now slated to meet for a week in November. From the draft programme, it still looks like a lot of talk but little action, with no concrete expected outcome. There appears to still be too much reliance on outside experts at a time when
the new GGE setting has raised the expectation of more substantive engagement by the governments themselves.

At the end of September, key states such as Brazil finally paid their overdue CCW funds, but this does not solve the CCW’s broader financial management problems. The UN finance system must aim to issue invoices in time for states to pay sufficient funds to hold one of more Group of Governmental Experts meetings in the first half of 2018.

Moreover, one or two weeks of multilateral talks over more than an entire year remains an insufficient response to the concerns raised by these weapons. States at the Convention on Conventional Weapons should be ashamed by their failure to discuss these weapons this year, let alone take action.

The Group of Governmental Experts has been tasked with further exploring the issue and agreeing, if possible, on “recommendations on options.” Identifying such options at the CCW should be a swift exercise as there are only three real outcomes: 1) a ban protocol, or 2) a protocol containing restrictions (regulation), or 3) no new protocol.

Since 2013, 19 countries have endorsed the call to ban fully autonomous weapons, which is a goal shared by our Campaign to Stop Killer Robots. Dozens more have affirmed the importance of retaining meaningful or appropriate or adequate human control over critical combat functions. This level of interest in taking action shows there is likely a strong foundation of support for creating new international law.

We urge all states to participate substantively in the first meetings of the Group of Governmental Experts next month, which is open to all countries regardless of whether they have ratified the CCW. We appreciate the preparations for this meeting by GGE chair Ambassador Amandeep Singh Gill of India and his team.

We call on states to pursue a revised mandate at the CCW’s annual meeting on 22–24 November 2017 that continues the Group of Governmental Experts and requires that it meet for at least four weeks in 2018 to lay the groundwork necessary to negotiate a new CCW protocol on lethal autonomous weapons systems.

We don’t need another inconclusive talk shop, and the window for preventative action is fast closing. 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 many 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 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.

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.

#   #   #