Less than a week after governments met at the UN in Geneva to try to agree on a way forward on autonomous weapon systems, the US Department of Defense announced a $2 billion investment in artificial intelligence (AI) technologies. While the vast majority of countries have made it clear that they want to prevent the development of weapons that would operate outside of meaningful human control, the US military is clearly forging ahead towards such a future.

This is a classic example of one of the key problems plaguing international peace and security. The desire for domination by a tiny minority of governments imperils the rest of the world—and those governments’ own populations. The development of killer robots will not bring peace or security to the world; it will result in devastatingly costly arms races, increasing inequality within and between countries, violations of human rights and international humanitarian law, and a loss of human dignity. But a handful of states are seeking their development, with billions of dollars worth of military contracts on the line—and thus are blocking international attempts to prevent the nightmare dystopia waiting for us at the end of this path.

We’ve seen the same with nuclear weapons, with guns and ammunition, with the practices of the international arms trade and of bombing towns and cities. We know where this is heading. Once again, the concept of minority rule—which current procedures in the UN system facilitates—is putting us all at risk.

On the eve of Zeid Ra’ad Al Hussein’s departure as UN High Commissioner for Human Rights, he lamented that “too many summits and conferences held between states are tortured affairs that lack profundity but are full of jargon and tiresome clichés that are, in a word, meaningless. What is absent,” he argued, “is a sincere will to work together, though all will claim—again, under the lights and on camera—that they are wholly committed to doing so.” He criticised the international community, “led by too many feckless politicians,” for being “too weak to privilege human lives, human dignity, tolerance—and ultimately, global security—over the price of hydrocarbons and the signing of defence contracts.”

This is something delegates to First Committee should think about ahead of the next session. Who are they coming to the UN to represent? Whose interests—and security—will they seek to protect? Are they here in New York to act on behalf of the interest of humanity? Or on behalf of those profiting from violence and conflict?

This briefing book, written by civil society activists and experts, presents both challenges and suggested solutions for a number of issues related to weapons and war. The non-governmental organisations, coalitions, and campaigns participating most actively at First Committee have argued consistently that we
can and must advance human security and social and economic justice through disarmament and arms control. We call for an approach to disarmament that is driven by the rights of people most affected by armed violence, not by the discretion of states and organisations most responsible for it.

We believe that most delegates seek true progress and the enhancement of human security, and we seek to work with those delegations at this meeting and beyond. The hope that Zeid expresses at the end of his farewell article is that grassroots activists can coordinate with each other, and, where possible, work with those in business and other sectors to stand up to those who threaten humanity. It’s interesting, in this context, that The Washington Post report on the Pentagon’s AI investments notes that the move steps up not just a technological arms race with China but also an ideological conflict with tech workers inside the United States. Indeed, a “worker uprising” inside Google just a few months ago led to the company agreeing not to renew its contract with the US Department of Defense.³

One of the tech workers involved in this action attended the UN talks in Geneva on autonomous weapons. He was clear that the 4000+ workers that took their company to task over Project Maven are only the tip of the iceberg in the growing resistance to the development of unaccountable technologies. “But there is so much more work to do to make sure that machines serve the needs of human beings and not the other way around,” warned Amr Gaber, who in addition to being a Google employee is also with the Tech Workers Coalition. In this endeavour, he said, “We are tired of weak, selfish and dishonest leadership, bottomless greed and exploitation and we are tired of artificial conflict. We are tired of hearing that these issues are too hard to solve and we have to wait and we have to continue to suffer while the rich and powerful eat the world and make it harder for us to live decent lives and ensure the same for our children. We are standing up now for justice, for freedom, homes for the unhoused, food for the hungry, dignity for all work, keeping families together, and a better future for all people around the world regardless of race, gender, sexual orientation, religion, national origin, immigration status, age, or ability. Join us.”⁴

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