Fully autonomous weapons
Campaign to Stop Killer Robots

Background
Lethal autonomous weapon systems, also known as fully autonomous weapons or killer robots, raise fundamental ethical, moral, legal, accountability, operational, technical, and security concerns. There is now widespread agreement that some form of human control is required over life-and-death decisions.

Yet a handful of heavily militarised governments are blocking proposals to begin negotiations on a new treaty or any other concrete measure, in a desperate attempt to curb collective ambitions aimed at regulating this emerging technology.

Around the world, demands are multiplying for a new treaty to prohibit weapons systems that would select and engage targets without meaningful human control. The Campaign to Stop Killer Robots, which is working to support the development of such a treaty, has nearly doubled in size over the past year, to a current total of 113 non-governmental organisations in 57 countries.¹

Current context
Approximately 90 governments have met eight times since 2014 at the Convention on Conventional Weapons (CCW) at the UN in Geneva to discuss what to do about killer robots. Most participating states have expressed their strong desire to negotiate a legally-binding instrument to retain human control over the use of force, including 29 countries that explicitly seek a ban treaty.²

Yet a few countries with advanced militaries object to any regulatory action, arguing that moves to create new law are “premature.” These states are investing significant funds to develop weapon systems with decreasing human control over the critical functions of selecting and engaging targets.

The CCW’s reliance on taking decisions by consensus has meant that one or two states can block agreement sought by a majority. At the last meeting in August 2019, Russia and the United States bullied the meeting into accepting an outcome document containing ambiguous and unambitious recommendations for future work.³ The inability of states to reach a credible outcome at the CCW means more diplomatic talk but no viable action in that forum. With demands increasing for a new treaty to prevent a future of fully autonomous weapons, it is time to find another path to negotiate one.

Last November, UN Secretary-General António Guterres called such weapons systems “politically unacceptable and morally repugnant” and urged nations to prohibit them. On 9 July, the parliamentary assembly of the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) adopted a declaration urging the 57 OSCE member states “to support international negotiations to ban lethal autonomous weapons.”⁴

An increasing number of technology workers are refusing to work on projects that may pave the way towards fully autonomous weapons. They join more
than 4,500 artificial intelligence (AI) experts that have called for a new treaty to prohibit lethal autonomous weapons systems in various open letters since 2015.

In August, Dutch NGO PAX published a survey of 50 technology companies in 12 countries, reviewing their activities and policies in the relation to potential development of killer robots. The report found that Google is putting safeguards in place after it committed in 2018 to not “design or deploy” AI for use in weapons.

More than 20 Nobel Peace Laureates and more than 160 religious leaders and faith organisations of various denominations have called for a ban on killer robots, while children and young people are showing increasing interest in the killer robots challenge. In August, an exhibition by the Campaign to Stop Killer Robots at the 24th World Scout Jamboree in West Virginia attracted strong interest. Thousands of scouts visited the booth, providing many ideas for how to address concerns raised by fully autonomous weapons.

The time is ripe for states to launch negotiations on a new ban treaty to maintain meaningful human control over the use of force. Such an agreement would be operationalised through a collection of positive obligations and prohibitions.

**Recommendations**

**During First Committee, delegations should:**
- Acknowledge the mounting calls to negotiate a new treaty to prohibit weapons systems that would select and engage targets without meaningful human control; and
- Express disappointment in the weak CCW outcome and call for negotiations on a new treaty to retain meaningful human control over the use of force.

**Beyond First Committee, states should:**
- Seek a revised mandate at the CCW’s annual meeting on 15 November to begin negotiating a new protocol stipulating prohibitions and restrictions on lethal autonomous weapons systems in 2020; and
- Develop formal national policies and national legislation to explicitly ban fully autonomous weapons and retain meaningful human control over the use of force.

*Author: Mary Wareham*

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1 See https://www.stopkillerrobots.org/members.
2 Algeria, Argentina, Austria, Bolivia, Brazil, Chile, China (supports a ban on use only), Colombia, Costa Rica, Cuba, Djibouti, Ecuador, El Salvador, Egypt, Ghana, Guatemala, the Holy See, Iraq, Jordan, Mexico, Morocco, Nicaragua, Pakistan, Panama, Peru, the State of Palestine, Uganda, Venezuela, and Zimbabwe.