STATEMENT BY

H.E. Ambassador Henk Cor van der Kwast
Permanent Representative of the Kingdom of the Netherlands
to the Conference on Disarmament and
Disarmament Ambassador at large

CCW Informal Meeting of Experts on Lethal Autonomous Weapons Systems (LAWS)
13 – 16 May 2014

General debate

Mr. Chairman,

Let me first congratulate you on the organization of this meeting on Lethal Autonomous Weapons Systems or LAWS. It was under your able leadership that the CCW in November last year decided by consensus on holding this informal expert meeting. You could then, and can now, count on the full support of my delegation in making this first exchange of views on this topic into a success.

I would also like to acknowledge the crucial and important role that the NGO community has played in raising the challenges with regard to LAWS to the international community. Never before has a disarmament-related issue gained the interest so quickly. When the issue was first raised it took only little more than a year to adopt a mandate to further explore this topic in the CCW context. This rapid development both shows the importance of the role of the NGO community in disarmament matters as well as the urgency the international community attaches to debating LAWS.

Mr. Chairman,

The possible development of Lethal Autonomous Weapons Systems raises many legal, ethical and policy questions. We are only beginning to understand the problems related to LAWS.
In the Netherlands we have started a discussion on this issue with involvement of the ministries of Foreign Affairs and Defence, relevant partners of civil society and academia in order to gain a better knowledge of the developments in this field and related problems.

In order to promote and deepen the international dialogue on the issue, the Netherlands have, together with Switzerland, started a project of expert discussions with UNIDIR. The 1st result of this work you have found on your desks.

We hope to use this week’s meeting to gain new insights.

One of the biggest challenges is to define what we exactly should be looking at. There is a whole spectrum of labels being used like ‘robots’, ‘autonomous weapons systems’, ‘killer robots’, lethal autonomous robotics’, semi- and full autonomous weapons systems and other terminology.

For us the core of the matter is a weapon system that once activated can select and engage targets without human intervention or supervision. This approach was used in the report by the Special rapporteur on extrajudicial summary and arbitrary executions Christopher Heyns and indicates the essence of the problem. At the same time we note that existing partially autonomous systems such as the goal keeper and the patriot are operating without raising any legal or moral question.

We are concerned about autonomous weapons in the future operating outside of meaningful human control.

In answering the question about the legality of weapon systems we are guided by international law and in particular by International Humanitarian Law. While developing new weapon systems, states should remain within the boundaries of international law.

We are encouraged to see that many states have similar questions and are willing to engage in a debate on this issue with a view to find answers and to see where and if we have to draw red lines.

Mr. Chairman,

We will participate actively in the discussions this week with a view to gaining a better understanding of the challenges at hand.

Thank you