Thank you Chair. I appreciate the opportunity to speak on behalf of Mines Action Canada.

Although today we are starting the 5th Review Conference of the Convention on Conventional Weapons, we must spend our time looking forward. We are entrusted with preventing humanitarian harm from existing weapons like incendiary weapons and from future weapons that will require new legal instruments to avoid catastrophes to come.

CCW has spent three years holding informal meetings about autonomous weapons systems. At times during those discussions, we have felt that some have underestimated the skills, knowledge, intelligence, training, experience, humanity and morality that women and men in uniform combine with situational awareness and IHL to make decisions during conflict. We work closely with roboticists, and engineers, but despite their expertise and the high quality of their work, we do not believe an algorithm could replicate this complex and very human decision making process. Robotics should only be used to inform and supplement human decision making.

In the CCW’s work on autonomous weapons systems, we have learned more about Article 36 reviews but it is clear that states need to be more transparent, systemic and rigorous in their weapons review processes. Mines Action Canada
believes that Article 36 weapons reviews should be a topic of discussion at the international level to strengthen both policy and practice around the world.

However, better weapons reviews will not solve the problems associated with autonomous weapons systems. For example, Article 36 reviews are not obligated to cover weapons used for domestic purposes outside of armed conflict such as policing, border control, or crowd control. Most importantly, weapons reviews cannot answer moral, ethical, technical and political questions. An Article 36 review cannot tell us if it is acceptable to the public conscience for a machine to kill without meaningful human control.

It is time for a separate effort to strengthen the standards and transparency around weapons reviews. That effort must neither distract from nor overtake our work here to deal with the real moral, legal, ethical and security problems associated with autonomous weapons systems. Weapons reviews must be grounded in new and robust international law that clearly and deliberately puts meaningful human control at the centre of all weapons development.

The concerns raised by autonomous weapons are urgent and must take priority. If we wait until everyone has a clear understanding of every aspect of the issue to start a Group of Governmental Experts the window of opportunity to prevent humanitarian harm from autonomous weapons will close. A GGE will allow high contracting parties to develop their understanding of the issue and to pursue effective outcomes.

In Canada, particularly, this year’s defence review offered an opportunity for the government to hear from a number of experts on autonomous weapons systems.
A GGE next year would give Canada the opportunity to share the results of that process and to contribute our collective understanding of the issue.

Mines Action Canada, as a co-founder of the Campaign to Stop Killer Robots, believes that the way forward must lead to a pre-emptive ban on autonomous weapons systems as a tool to prevent humanitarian harm without damaging research and development on autonomy and robotics for military or civilian purposes. Earlier this year, a Canadian robotics expert made it clear there are no other applications for an autonomous system which can make a “kill or not kill” decision. The function providing an autonomous weapon the ability to make the “kill decision” does not have an equivalent civilian use therefore, pre-emptive ban on autonomous weapons systems would have no impact on the funding of research and development for artificial intelligence.

As experts at the meeting in April made clear our window of opportunity to prevent future humanitarian harm from autonomous weapons will not stay open long so we need to be moving forward at this Review Conference. Therefore, we urge states to accept the recommendation for an open-ended Group of Governmental Experts next year.