As we gather here in Geneva, we are witness to the destruction of entire cities, communities, and societies elsewhere. The worst example of this right now is Aleppo. This city has seen the relentless use of explosive weapons in populated areas, leading to the destruction of hospitals and homes. Prohibited or restricted weapons such as incendiary weapons, chemical weapons, and cluster munitions have been used. No humanitarian aid has reached the area since July 2016. There are about 275,000 civilians besieged in eastern Aleppo, including 100,000 children. Leaflets warning civilians that they will be annihilated if they stay are being dropped and there is widespread concern about the impact of potentially 200,000 residents fleeing to neighbouring countries.

The situation in Syria is a humanitarian catastrophe, a failure of the international community's commitments and obligations to prevent human suffering. It is also a failure of disarmament and arms control regimes, including the CCW.

Many states parties to the CCW pride the treaty on its “appropriate balance” of “military necessity” with “humanitarian cost”. Some of these states have used this formulation to prevent the development of restrictions or prohibitions on weapons. This has direct humanitarian consequences in conflicts around the world, where states and non-state actors continue to use weapons that should be outlawed under the CCW or other relevant instruments.

Incendiary weapons, for example, cause horrific humanitarian harm. They burn through skin and cannot easily be treated. These weapons are restricted through the CCW, but should be prohibited outright, regardless of their means of delivery. States parties should also use an effects-based definition of these weapons that includes white phosphorus. The CCW Review Conference should thus establish parameters for discussion to amend Protocol III.

Improvised explosive devices are also causing humanitarian harm around the world and should be addressed. However, attention to improvised devices, especially in a way that is predominantly focused on non-state actor use, must not overshadow our efforts to confront the multi-billion dollar arms trade industry fuelling the vast majority of the death and destruction we see around the world.

Many of the weapons produced by this industry include conventional explosive weapons that kill civilians and destroy civilian infrastructure when used in populated areas. There is an international initiative underway for the development of a political commitment to end this practice. It is well past time for states to take this seriously as an issue requiring dedicated and determined action. How many more people will be killed from explosive weapon use while we deliberate?

How many people will be killed by autonomous machines in the future if we do not prevent the development of autonomous weapons while we still have a chance? Witnessing the horrific humanitarian consequences of the use of armed drones and wishing to prevent the further automation of means of violence, we can clearly see the need for meaningful human control over all weapons and individual attacks. There is something especially cynically abhorrent in the idea of assigning the killing of human beings to a technological creation. As a member of the Campaign to Stop Killer Robots, we call for a ban on autonomous weapons and the creation of a Group of Governmental Experts towards this goal.

How this issue is handled, as with all the other issues mentioned here, is of critical importance to the CCW’s relevance and legitimacy. This treaty was designed to protect civilians and combatants in situations of armed conflict. Its structure as a convention with protocols was a deliberate attempt to ensure the treaty could be expanded and updated to account for technological and methodological developments in warfare. Refusing to discuss proposed amendments to existing protocols or to undertake the negotiation of new law goes against the purpose of the treaty and risks further humanitarian devastation. If states parties want the CCW to have any credibility they must start taking their obligations seriously and stop hiding behind—and creating—loopholes to justify violations of international humanitarian law and human rights.