Opening Statement
Delivered by: Erin Hunt, Programme Coordinator

Thank you Mr. Chair. As a co-founder of the Campaign to Stop Killer Robots, Mines Action Canada is very conscious of public opinion and the public conversation concerning autonomous weapons systems.

Recently, autonomous weapon systems have been in the news in Canada. Last week, over 200 Canadian Artificial Intelligence experts released an open letter to Prime Minister Justin Trudeau calling for Canadian leadership on the issue. The letter states [quote] “Lethal autonomous weapons systems that remove meaningful human control from determining the legitimacy of targets and deploying lethal force sit on the wrong side of a clear moral line.” [unquote]

Copies of this letter can be found at the back of the room. It is not only in Canada where the AI research community is speaking out - a similar letter was also released in Australia. As mentioned by my colleague, since the last time the CCW met a letter from over 100 founders of robotics and artificial intelligence companies calling for a preemptive ban on autonomous weapons was also released. Additional national letters are in the works.

These public letters show that concerns about possible negative impacts of a pre-emptive ban are misplaced as ICRAC made clear moments ago and what the research community is calling for is bold and decisive action.

Mines Action Canada appreciates the significant number of expert presentations we have had this week but we hope that states will take time to share their views substantially over the remaining days.

From states who say Article 36 review may be sufficient to deal with our concerns about autonomous weapons systems, we hope to hear how an Article 36 review would be able to
assess bias in the data used in machine learning and how comportment with IHL would be ensured by systems that continue to learn after the review.

In light of persistent statements from some delegations that they are uncertain about what we are talking about here, we hope to hear states share their current understanding of autonomous weapons systems. Specific definitions are not needed at this stage but we believe there is more clarity and consensus on these questions than one may think.

We would like to hear more on next steps from states who are calling for a pre-emptive ban. Mines Action Canada would welcome concrete discussions on how to ensure that momentum is not lost on this issue. We lost a week of work in August but as I mentioned at the beginning of my statement, the public conversation about autonomous weapons continues to advance and the people at home expect us to make progress.

This week it is important to continue to build on the work done in the past and to ensure that further discussions take place in 2018. Administrative challenges do not lessen “the need to continue the codification and progressive development of the rules of international law applicable in armed conflict” that is reaffirmed in the Preamble of this Convention. The technology is rapidly advancing and so must our conversations here.

Thank you.