Mr. Chairperson,

I have the honour to deliver this statement on behalf of the African Group of states in Geneva. We thank and congratulate you for your excellent leadership in conducting these discussions and assure you of our full support on this important issue.

Mr. Chair,

The African group unequivocally believes that now is the time to draw a normative line and determine what is collectively acceptable when it comes to employing autonomy in weapon systems and the use of force. To this end, we wish to make the following points:

First, in solidarity with the 26 countries that have now explicitly endorsed the call to pre-emptively ban lethal autonomous weapons, the African Group reiterates its call to ban weapons systems that are not under meaningful human control. This is for several reasons, chief among them being that use of such weapons would violate numerous binding rules of international law and create an accountability gap.

Second, because we emphasize the urgent need to negotiate a legally binding instrument that expressly outlaws weapon systems without meaningful human control. To this end, the African Group is of the position that it is not enough and certainly undesirable, for the international community to proceed with anything less of a legally binding instrument. We hope that can be achieved by agreeing to a negotiating mandate in November.

The African Group is aware that a legally binding instrument on this emerging technology may be challenging to enforce. However, it is better to struggle with adherence than allow unrestrained production of weapons systems that would be illegal and inhumane. Such weapons would also be unethical and against the dictates of public conscience. As aforementioned, the point here is for the international community to draw the line in the sand, a line that must never be crossed.

Third, the African Group notes the strong convergence among states on the need to maintain some form of human control over weapons systems. Of course, some states use different terms to refer or describe the extent of that human control. As the African Group emphasised at the last GGE meeting in April, the term or word used to describe that human control doesn’t matter but the substance of that control. Various disciplines are relevant in determining what human control should look like, the African Group emphasises that applicable and binding legal standards – in particular, those found in international law – must be the yardstick.
Fourth, the African Group notes of the continued dissonance that arise whenever ethical and moral arguments or considerations related to LAWS are raised. One fundamental question to consider is how human agency would be undermined by lethal autonomous weapons systems. This goes to the heart of the debate as it relates to what is meant by “decision-making” whenever and wherever force is used.

The African Group firmly believes that where LAWS without meaningful human control are used, human agency is fundamentally undermined to the extent that it does not only offend ethical considerations but violates applicable international law rules.

Mr. Chair, this week we must agree on the recommended action to be taken at the next Meeting of High Contracting Parties. We support the proposal made by Austria at the last meeting to include a recommendation to start negotiations on a protocol on autonomous weapon systems “that do not ensure a meaningful level of human control in critical functions.”

Finally, the African Group welcomes the offer made by UN Secretary-General in his “Agenda for Disarmament” to “support the efforts of Member States to elaborate new measures, including though political or legally binding arrangements, to ensure that humans remain at all times in control over the use of force.” His briefing paper provides a detailed and sobering review of the many serious challenges raised by autonomy in weapons systems.

We also welcome the recent pledge issued by more than 200 technology companies and organizations and by more than 2,600 scientists, artificial intelligence experts and other individuals committing not to develop lethal autonomous weapons systems. We note the ethical principles issued by Google in June and especially the company’s promise not to design or develop artificial intelligence for use in weapons.

I thank you.