Characterisation of the systems under consideration in order to promote a common understanding on concepts and characteristics relevant to the objectives and purposes of the Convention (agenda item 6a).

Mr. Chair,

Ireland maintains the view that developing a common understanding of what we mean by LAWS in the context of our mandate must remain a central part of our discussions. While there may be an understandable temptation to skip the defining step and get straight into solving the problem; it is only by reaching a common understanding on the concepts and characteristics (or developing a working definition) relevant to LAWS that we can consider the most suitable response for addressing the humanitarian and international security challenges posed by emerging technologies in the area of LAWS. In the absence of a basic shared common understanding or working definition, we should (for the moment) set aside debates over whether such systems exist at present and whether future systems should be permitted, prohibited or restricted.

The efforts of the Chair in April to focus on four broad approaches to the characterisation of LAWS served as a useful reference point during our discussions and helped to categorise different ways to think about LAWS.

It is important that we now focus our attention this week on trying to further our discussions on this agenda item and work to agree a common understanding on the basic characteristics of the systems under consideration. We should start by considering what attributes or elements a common working understanding should include and what it should not include, while adopting an approach that less is better. To try to attain agreement at this stage on a more complex definition could be counter-productive and would likely create greater divergence among states on the issue.

Mr Chair,

In April, my delegation put forward a proposal to reach a common understanding on a working definition and we present this again this week for consideration by States. We start by breaking LAWS into its constituent parts. The term LAWS is comprised of three distinct elements, these are: lethality, autonomy and weapons systems.

First, it is important to acknowledge that lethality is a novel concept in the CCW framework. Lethality was not a prerequisite for the inclusion of any weapons including inter alia blinding lasers and non-detectable fragments. Therefore, we need to consider whether a
weapons system needs to be specifically designed to have a lethal impact on human beings or whether the scope of our discussions should include non-lethal weapon systems that or systems could have lethal impacts in certain circumstances but where the lethal effect is not the primary purpose of the system. Another approach would be to remove the term ‘lethal’ from the title we are using. Of course, we recognise there remains different opinions among States on the inclusion or exclusion of term ‘Lethality.’ The primary driver for these differences are captured well in the Chairs report from the April GGE.

Second, the term autonomy suggests a level of independence which in practice can vary from zero to full autonomy. The scope of autonomy to be allowed would seem to go to the heart of our discussions and we note many delegations have suggested that only fully autonomous systems are a source of concern. If that was accepted then we should add the term ‘fully’ to our title. We note also that some delegations have suggested distinguishing autonomy from semi-autonomy or automation at the outset, or using a broad spectrum of autonomy, with different levels of independence in lethality or the means to be lethal, at the outset.

Finally, the use of the term weapon system implies in our view that the system under consideration should include the weapon that actually delivers the required effect to a target. The ‘weapon system’ may and probably will include elements of associated detection and targeting processes, but it must include the application of the effect to the target.

Mr Chair,

Taking these basic building blocks, we remain of the view that a simple common understanding or working definition of LAWS could read as follows:

A weapon system which can act autonomously in delivering (lethal) effects to a target and may also act autonomously in detection and target selection prior to engagement of the target.

The level of autonomy can vary from basic levels of automation through a spectrum of an increasing number of autonomous functions and decreasing human control up to and including fully autonomous systems which can operate across a range of functions without direct human control.

Thank You