Meeting of the High Contracting Parties to the
Convention on Prohibitions or Restrictions on the Use of Certain
Conventional Weapons which may be Deemed to be Excessively Injurious
or to Have Indiscriminate Effects (CCW)

21-23 November 2018, Geneva

Statement of the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC)

Agenda item 8: Autonomous weapon systems

The ICRC welcomes the progress made by High Contracting Parties at the Group of
Governmental Experts (GGE) on “Lethal Autonomous Weapon Systems” in addressing the
unique legal questions, and ethical concerns, raised by weapons with autonomy in the ‘critical
functions’ of selecting and attacking targets. We thank the Chairperson of the GGE,
Ambassador Amandeep Singh Gill, for successfully guiding its work and its adoption of a solid,
and very useful, report in August.

As evident from discussions at the GGE, there is general agreement among States that human
control – be it qualified as ‘meaningful’, ‘substantive’, ‘appropriate’, ‘sufficient’ or ‘effective’, or
‘appropriate levels of human judgement’, or ‘human involvement’ – must be retained over
weapon systems and the use of force.

Significantly, the GGE report affirms the applicability of international humanitarian law, and the
importance of a human-centred approach to the issue of autonomous weapon systems, which
recognizes that “human responsibility for decisions on the use of weapons systems must be
retained since accountability cannot be transferred to machines” (IV.A Possible Guiding
Principles), and that “human responsibility for the use of force must be retained” (IV.C Human
element in the use of lethal force).

As the ICRC has stressed during GGE meetings, there is a strong legal, ethical and military
operational basis for human control. Clearly, the loss of human control over the selection and
attack of targets in armed conflict could risk significant humanitarian consequences for civilians
and violations of international humanitarian law. A loss of control would also raise profound
ethical concerns about the erosion of human responsibility for decisions to kill, injure or destroy.

As set out our Working Paper (WP3) submitted to this Meeting – “The Element of Human
Control” – the ICRC believes States must now tackle the fundamental issue of what
human control means in practice. Considering core questions of human supervision,
predictability and reliability, and operational constraints will help guide necessary work by High
Contracting Parties to develop internationally agreed limits on autonomy in weapon systems.

Specifically, the ICRC recommends that the 2019 GGE is dedicated to reaching common
understandings on the elements of human control over the critical functions of weapon
systems that are needed for legal compliance and ethical acceptability. The ICRC
believes this should be reflected explicitly in the GGE’s mandate.

In the view of the ICRC, this approach will facilitate the identification of a standard of human
control that is clear, robust and practical, and that can hold up to future developments. This
task is increasingly urgent as military technology developments that remove, or reduce, human
control over the critical functions of weapon systems are threatening to outpace deliberations.