Statement by Ambassador Henk Cor van der Kwast, Netherlands Permanent Representative to the Conference on Disarmament, on Lethal Autonomous Robot Systems

Thursday 14 November 2013

Mr. Chairman,

There have been several definitions floating around lethal autonomous robotics or Lars. The essential element is that lars are weapon systems that once activated, can select and engage targets without further human intervention. This general approach, that was used in the report of the Special rapporteur on extrajudicial summary and arbitrary executions, indicates the essence of the problem. The problem is in the absence of further human intervention, that makes those weapons systems different. Because of this difference we need to discuss this further. Following the discussion in the HRC, we think the disarmament fora and in particular the CCW is the right place for this discussion.

Elements in this discussion are on the one hand “the activation of Lars” and on the other hand “the absence of further human intervention”.

The possible development of Lethal Autonomous Robot Systems raises many legal, ethical and policy questions. In the Netherlands we have started a discussion on this issue with involvement of the ministries of Foreign Affairs and Defence, relevant partners of civil society and academia in order to get a better understanding of the developments in this field and the related problems.

In answering the question about the legality of weapon systems we are guided by international law and in particular by International Humanitarian Law. While developing new weapon systems, states should remain within the boundaries of international law.

Accountability (legal accountability) is a fundamental issue here, where lies the human responsibility and does it end? Armed conflict and international law and in particular international humanitarian law require human judgement, understanding of peoples’ intentions, and compassion. Lars cannot make value based calculations. Individual and state responsibility are essential for accountability towards international law.
During Monday's informal debate we were encouraged to see that many states have similar questions and are willing to engage in a debate on this issue with a view to find answers and to see where and if we have to draw red lines. In this regard we also welcome the side event on lethal autonomous robots by Human Rights Watch earlier this week.

We will participate actively in discussions on LARS and in that regard support the proposal of the CCW chair for an informal discussion on LARS in the framework of CCW.

Thank you