



Submission on Autonomous Weapon Systems to the United Nations Secretary-General ODA-2024-00019/LAWS

The Stop Killer Robots campaign welcomes the opportunity to submit our views to the United Nations Secretary-General in response to Resolution 78/241. Established in 2012, we are a coalition of more than 250 non-governmental organisations and academic partners working across 70 countries.¹ Towards our vision and goals,² we are calling on states to adopt an international treaty on autonomous weapons systems that ensures meaningful human control over the use of force and rejects the automation of killing.

New rules are needed:

After ten years of international discussions, a legally binding instrument is the only effective way to start to address the humanitarian, legal, security, technological and ethical challenges and concerns that autonomous weapons systems raise. Relying on existing law alone will not be sufficient. The contributions of states and non-governmental experts to discussions have decisively demonstrated this. Specific rules and legal clarity are needed to draw clear lines to protect humanity.

There is now a critical mass of support:

Around the world, momentum continues to build behind the call for a treaty.

- More than 115 states now support a legally binding instrument.³
- States have issued regional communiqués committing to work for a treaty, and convened crucial international and regional conferences in Austria, Costa Rica, Luxembourg, Trinidad and Tobago, the Philippines, and Sierra Leone.
- The International Committee of the Red Cross and the United Nations Secretary-General have jointly called on states to negotiate a treaty by 2026, which we strongly support.
- Thousands of scientists, tech workers, and leaders in robotics technology and AI, as well as religious leaders, parliamentarians, a wide range of civil society organisations, and public opinion in countries across the globe also support a treaty.⁴

Negotiations can and must start:

All states and stakeholders that are committed to achieving a treaty must now work together in a spirit of genuine, cross-regional partnership and take concrete steps towards starting negotiations.

- A treaty must be negotiated in a forum that is inclusive of all states and civil society, and where progress cannot be blocked through veto, consensus rules, or their misuse.
- Because not all states parties to the Convention on Conventional Weapons (CCW) wish to negotiate a treaty, progress cannot be made on this in that forum.

¹ See www.stopkillerrobots.org/about-us and www.stopkillerorobts.org/a-global-push/member-organisations

² See www.stopkillerrobots.org/vision-and-values/

³ See <https://automatedresearch.org/state-positions/>

⁴ See <https://www.stopkillerrobots.org/a-global-push/a-shared-movement/> and <https://www.stopkillerrobots.org/the-story-so-far/>



- Establishing a negotiating mandate for a treaty through the United Nations General Assembly, as soon as possible, represents the best opportunity to move forward.
- From work in the CCW, there is now a broad understanding amongst states of what autonomous weapons systems are, and that a “two-tier” approach of prohibitions and positive obligations is required to effectively regulate them. This can be built on to agree a legally binding instrument.

An effective treaty on autonomous weapons systems

Scope:

Stop Killer Robots understands autonomous weapons systems to be those that detect and apply force to a target based on the processing of data from sensor inputs. In these systems, after activation by a human user, there is a period of time where the weapon system can apply force to a target without direct human approval. The specific object to be attacked, and the exact time and place of the attack, are determined by sensor processing, not humans.

- A treaty on autonomous weapons systems must include all systems that fall within this scope. Our concerns arise from the automated process by which such systems function. Our key concerns are at the erosion of human control over the use of force – which raises serious legal, ethical, humanitarian, and security concerns – as well as the ethical unacceptability of increasingly automated killing and digital dehumanisation.

The centrality of the role of humans:

The human role must be the central element of a regulatory framework. Ensuring meaningful human control must be a core purpose of a treaty.

A structure of prohibitions and positive obligations:

A treaty should prohibit autonomous weapons systems that are ethically or legally unacceptable. The use of all other autonomous weapons systems should be regulated through positive obligations to ensure they remain under meaningful human control.

Autonomous weapons systems that are not prohibited must be subject to positive obligations on design, development, and use to ensure meaningful human control:

Meaningful human control requires that a person can make a moral and legal judgement on the effects of an attack, and fulfil their obligation to apply the law. It also means there is a human user who is morally, and legally, responsible for the effects of an attack.

A treaty’s positive obligations should therefore ensure that a human user is able to sufficiently anticipate the effects of an attack, and that after an attack has taken place they should understand and be able to explain its effects. To achieve such meaningful control, among other requirements:

- The user should be able to have a sufficient functional understanding of how a system works.
- Systems should be predictable and reliable.



- The user should be able to have sufficient understanding of the context where the weapons system will be deployed, and how it will function in that environment.
- The user must be able to limit the functioning of the weapon system in time and space.

Autonomous weapons systems that cannot be used with meaningful human control must be prohibited:

Systems whose technical configuration or environment of use means the user is not able to meet the requirements above could not be used in line with legal and ethical norms, and would raise questions about who was legally and morally responsible for any violations of the law. They must be prohibited.

Autonomous weapons systems that target people must be prohibited:

Even if used with meaningful human control, we consider such systems unacceptable because they reduce people to objects, which is an affront to human dignity.

- Autonomous weapons systems targeting people raise the most fundamental ethical concerns. They represent an extreme example of digital dehumanisation, for civilian and military victims alike.
- Racialized and historically marginalised populations are already disproportionately harmed by automated decision-making processes – for example, because biases in our societies are reproduced in data used to train algorithms. Autonomous weapons systems targeting people run the risk of biased technologies making determinations related to life and death. This must be prevented through a categorical prohibition.

The need for action now

Autonomous weapons systems change the relationship between people and technology. They disempower, disconnect, and dislocate humans in the use of force. The use of autonomous weapons systems beyond armed conflict, for example in border control and policing, would, furthermore, undermine international human rights law and freedoms.

Developments in weapons technology and events in conflicts around the world are already showing the urgent need for action. National programmes for weapons development by countries such as Russia and the US show countries are already competing for military advantage through these technologies, with grave risks for global peace and security. Recent reports of the use of decision-support systems by Israel in Gaza, though not autonomous weapons systems, show how the quest for speed through AI, the erosion of meaningful human control, and the reduction of people to data points can contribute to devastating humanitarian harm to civilians.⁵

It is vital that states negotiate a treaty to start drawing clear lines for humanity now.

⁵ See <https://www.stopkillerrobots.org/news/use-of-lavender-data-processing-system-in-gaza/>