

Speech - Summary of ANNEX II of the UN SG's report on Autonomous Weapons Systems. Monday 12 May 2025 Delivered by Nicole Van Rooijen, Stop Killer Robots

Programme

Introduction to the report of the Secretary-General (A/79/88) • Introductory briefings • Mr. René Holbach, Office for Disarmament Affairs (substantive portion and annex I) • Ms. Nicole van Rooijen, Campaign to Stop Killer Robots (annex II) • Questions and comments from the floor

Excellencies, distinguished delegates, representatives of civil society, academia, and industry,

It is an honour to address you today on a matter of profound global significance: autonomous weapons systems, their governance, and the urgent need for collective action.

Stop Killer Robots - which is an international coalition of over 270 non-governmental organisations, working in over 70 countries - is thankful for the opportunity to deliver the summary of Annex II of the Secretary-General's report on Autonomous Weapons Systems, which compiles the 29 submissions received from international and regional organisations, the International Committee of the Red Cross, civil society, the scientific community and industry.

Autonomous weapons systems are weapons systems that, once activated, can select and engage one or more targets without further

human intervention. With some actors pursuing new technologies at a rapid pace, the deployment of autonomous weapons systems introduces significant risks and challenges across multiple domains, including legal, ethical, humanitarian and security challenges.

I will now provide you with an overview of the concerns raised and underscore the path forward.

First, the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) highlights the urgency to develop new, international binding rules to regulate autonomous weapons systems. They advocate for the prohibition of unpredictable autonomous weapons systems and anti-personnel autonomous weapons systems, meaning those that can target human beings. The ICRC also calls for the regulation of all other weapons systems to ensure human responsibility and oversight are never lost.

Regional organisations, including from Latin America and the Caribbean, note the unique threats autonomous weapons systems pose to sovereignty, stability, and human dignity. They express concern about the disproportionate impact such weapons systems may have on the Global South. The key risks include, but are not limited to:

- Technological inequalities, due to the lack of resources to regulate and develop such weapons systems;
- Increased military disparities between countries;
- Regional instability, due to the proliferations of such weapons systems and the lowering of the threshold to conflict;
- Diversion of resources away from essential services, such as healthcare and education, to join the arms race.

Many regional organisations thus advocate for a legally binding treaty to prevent a new arms race that would disproportionately harm vulnerable populations.

From **civil society groups**, the response continues to be loud and unwavering. They highlight the risks autonomous weapons systems pose with regard to international human rights law, including the right to life, liberty and security of person, the right to be free from torture and other cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment or punishment, and the right to freedom of peaceful assembly.

Because AWS do not have the capacity to recognize the value of human life, their use in armed conflict or law enforcement operations would be fundamentally dehumanising and violate the right to dignity.

The use of AWS would also undermine the right to remedy. Individual operators would be unable to fully understand the likely effects of the unpredictable actions of an autonomous weapon system and thus could not prevent unlawful acts or be held accountable for failing to do so. The accountability gaps related to autonomous weapons systems would lead to a lack of justice and reparations.

Furthermore, according to Amnesty International, since law enforcement relies almost entirely on the use of lethal and less-lethal weapons to apply force to humans, prohibiting autonomous weapons systems (AWS) that use sensors to profile, target, and apply force to humans would effectively preclude their use in law enforcement contexts. Use in law enforcement would be inherently unlawful because international law and standards governing use of force in policing rely on nuanced human judgement and it would blur lines of responsibility and accountability.

Civil society groups further argue that autonomous weapon systems risk violating international humanitarian law, increasing civilian casualties, and exacerbating inequality, reinforcing systemic biases. Some have highlighted the risks associated with the integration of autonomous weapons systems with nuclear command, which would pose a grave risk of unintended escalation, potentially leading to accidental nuclear confrontation.

Ethical concerns carry through all the civil society submissions to the Secretary-General. The prospect of digital dehumanization, where people are reduced to data points in algorithms to be processed for killing, is widely regarded as ethically reprehensible and fundamentally incompatible with international legal and moral standards.

The **scientific community**, for its part, brings analytical rigor and moral clarity. Researchers warn that AI systems are not capable of the contextual judgment required under the laws of war. Additionally they are vulnerable to bias and misinterpretation of complex and volatile environments, and to unforeseen behavior when deployed. Scientists put forward the opacity and unpredictability of many algorithmic systems, warning that they may evolve in ways not foreseen by designers. They stress the importance of rigorous testing, documentation, and the development of enforceable technical standards.

And finally, the **industry sector**, those on the frontier of developing these technologies. While views vary, a number of industry representatives express support for clearer international standards and governance mechanisms. They highlight their support for technical standards that reinforce transparency, traceability, and human oversight, especially in systems that could be weaponized. They also raise concerns that market incentives may not align with rights-based approaches unless regulation is clear and enforceable.

Across these diverse stakeholder voices, the common core principles are:

- Meaningful human control must be preserved over critical functions of weapons systems.
- Accountability cannot be automated. Machines do not bear legal or moral responsibility; people do. Any deployment of lethal force must be traceable, explainable, and justifiable under international law.
- International humanitarian and human rights law must be upheld. No system, autonomous or not, should be permitted to operate in a manner that violates international law.
- Ethical lines must not be crossed. To allow a machine to make life-and-death decisions, is to strip human beings of one their most fundamental right—the right to be recognized and treated as moral agents.
- We need a legally binding instrument. Voluntary norms and non-binding declarations could be useful interim steps, but they

are not enough. The time has come to negotiate and adopt a treaty that prohibits and regulates autonomous weapons systems.

Excellencies and distinguished delegates,

The submissions in Annex II reflect a global call for more clarity, legal certainty, and political courage. We face a critical juncture. The Secretary General has rightly called for the conclusion of a legally binding international instrument on autonomous weapons systems by 2026.

The rapid proliferation of autonomous capabilities in weapons systems has profoundly altered the strategic landscape since the inception of international discussions in 2013, dramatically heightening the stakes and exacerbating the risks associated with continued inaction on the regulation of autonomous weapons systems.

Let us work together, in an inclusive manner, to establish clear international rules, that reaffirm our commitment to international law and that put human dignity and accountability at the core of global security.

Thank you.