



Permanent Mission of Sri Lanka to the UN, Geneva
Tel : (+41) 022 919 12 50, Fax : (+41) 022 734 90 84
E-mail: mission@lankamission.org Web: www.lankamission.org

Sri Lanka says Lethal Autonomous Weapons would undermine regional and global stability

Sri Lanka has cautioned that the potential military advantages of Lethal Autonomous Weapon Systems (LAWS) would risk proliferation and thereby lower the threshold of the rules of warfare, undermining regional as well as global stability. Sri Lanka also alerted on the risk of non-state actors gaining access to such weapons and the potential breach of cyber security in the autonomous technology used in weapons systems.

Sri Lanka's Ambassador to the UN in Geneva Ravinatha Aryasinha, made these observations during an intervention by Sri Lanka at a five day Meeting of Experts on Lethal Autonomous Weapon Systems (LAWS) within the framework of the Convention on Certain Conventional Weapons (CCW) which commenced yesterday (11 April) at the Palais des Nations in Geneva. LAWS also commonly known as 'Killer Robots', is being broadly categorized as an emerging type of autonomous technology with potential use in lethal weapons systems, that will once activated, have the ability to select, engage, and use force at targets, without any human intervention.

Ambassador Aryasinha who chaired the November 2015 Meeting of the High Contracting Parties of the CCW which decided to expand the mandate of the Experts meeting on LAWS, emphasized that in addition to the traditional submission of a Chair's summary of the proceedings in a personal capacity, space had been created, that the current session "may agree by consensus on recommendations for further work, for consideration by the Fifth Review Conference of the CCW to meet in December 2016". He said Sri Lanka calls for "the negotiation of a legally binding international instrument that regulates the use of autonomous technology in weapon systems", adding that "as an important first step, a Governmental Group of Experts (GGE) with an initial discussion mandate be appointed by consensus for this purpose, at the Fifth Review Conference of the Convention on Certain Conventional Weapons (CCW) to be held in December 2016". He further noted that the debate on LAWS is not merely a question to ban or not to ban autonomous technology in weapons systems, but rather a question of the acceptable threshold of the degree of autonomy in weapon systems that is in compliance with international law, in particular International Humanitarian Law (IHL).

The Ambassador said it is important that the CCW acts on this issue, in order to maintain its own credibility, and to strike a balance between the legitimate security aspirations of States and the inherent humanitarian concerns of the international community. Further, it provides an opportunity for both States, as well as Civil Society which continues to play an important role in furthering the debate on the LAWS, to engage and strengthen the CCW process. He cautioned that failure to live up to this expectation, would not only result in denying the 2016 Review Conference which meets only once in five years a historic opportunity to address this pressing issue decisively, but also to be at guilt if we had to witness the possible development of LAWS in an unregulated environment, to the detriment of humanity.

It was urged that those countries who are already in possession of autonomous weapons or have the capability to do so, engage in an open and constructive dialogue with the rest of the Member States to discuss genuine concerns and consider a way forward within the framework of the CCW. He said, more robust engagement in the discussion from the global South is also vital, for it is these States who are disadvantaged in the access to such technologies, and are likely to be more vulnerable during any potential warfare involving LAWS.

The Meeting of Experts chaired by Ambassador Michael Biontino of Germany for the second consecutive year, building on the two previous Expert Meetings held in 2014 and 2015 respectively, will be deliberating on different aspects of LAWS, including mapping autonomy, a working definition on LAWS, challenges in complying with International Humanitarian Law, Human Rights and Ethical issues, as well as the Security aspects including regional and global stability and the risk of proliferation and military necessity of LAWS.

Deputy Permanent Representative Mrs. Samantha Jayasuriya and Second Secretary Mrs. Mafusa Lafir also participated in the deliberations.

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