Remarks by Under-Secretary-General and High Representative for Disarmament Affairs
Ms. Izumi Nakamitsu

Opening of the August meeting of the 2018 Group of Governmental Experts on emerging technologies in the area of lethal autonomous weapons systems

Delivered by the Director of the Geneva Branch of the United Nations Office for Disarmament Affairs,
Ms. Anja Kaspersen

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Excellencies,
Distinguished delegates,
Ladies and gentlemen,

I am pleased to send this message to you, the group of governmental experts on emerging technologies in the area of lethal autonomous weapons systems, as you commence your second and last week of discussions for 2018.

In April, I urged this group to identify points of convergence and build common understandings related to limiting autonomy in the use of force. It is clear you made significant progress on these fronts during your last meeting. I am deeply heartened by this progress and the momentum that has been created and wish to acknowledge the role of your chair, Ambassador Amandeep Singh Gill, for the role his dedicated leadership has played in moving the discussion forward.

Shortly after your last meeting, the Secretary-General launched his new agenda for disarmament, “Securing Our Common Future”, here in Geneva. The agenda seeks to grapple with the challenges posed by developments in science and technology and their impact on emerging means and methods of warfare. The importance the Secretary-General places on this topic is reflected by the fact that it forms one of the disarmament agenda’s three core pillars – disarmament for future generations.

While the agenda acknowledges the massive benefits that advances in science and technology have brought the world, including to advance the 2030 agenda, it also highlights how various developments in these fields could enable the deployment of new weapons technologies with unclear or potentially dangerous implications for international peace and security.
Regarding emerging autonomous technologies in the context of new weapons systems, the agenda details multifaceted concerns. There are very real doubts about whether autonomous weapons systems could be used in conformity with international humanitarian law. As has been discussed in this forum, autonomous intelligent systems may take unanticipated or unexplainable actions, with possibly harmful implications, including for accountability. Moreover, such systems could create perceptions of casualty-light warfare, lowering the threshold for the use of force. They may also pose new proliferation challenges, including to non-State actors.

Above all, the agenda sets out the Secretary-General’s firm belief that we must take collective action to ensure that humans remain at all times in control over the use of force.

Arms control is at the intersection of technology and security, and therefore has always been responsive to trends and developments in science and technology. There is however concern that today’s developments threaten to outpace intergovernmental normative and regulatory responses.

Consequently, I believe it is essential that these issues continue to be considered with a sense of urgency, and also that these discussions continue to involve not only States, but also bring on board interdisciplinary insights and practices from civil society, academia and industry. I urge you to ensure that your deliberations continue to make progress toward articulating and advancing shared understandings and principles.
The United Nations stands ready to support the efforts of Member States in elaborating new measures to ensure that humans remain in control of the use of force. I look forward to working with you on this important element of securing our common future.

Before concluding, let me provide a brief update on the financial situation of the Convention. The November 2017 Meeting of High Contracting Parties to the CCW adopted a set of financial measures with the aim of starting the lengthier process of putting the Convention back on a more sustainable financial track. The UN Office for Disarmament Affairs (UNODA) has since worked together with Ambassador Karklins of Latvia, Chairperson of the 2018 Meeting of the High Contracting Parties to the Convention, and with other High Contracting Parties, on finding solutions to the continuing financial difficulties and structural issues of the Convention. We welcome that respective discussions are being continued in the margins of this meeting and would like to assure High Contracting Parties of the continued, full support of UNODA.

Thank you.