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Growing support for killer robots ban, but New Zealand's stance remains weak

An increasing number of states have affirmed the need to take action to protect humanity from the escalating threat of fully autonomous weapons, but New Zealand is regrettably not among them. Fully autonomous weapons - known as killer robots - are weapon systems that select and engage targets without any meaningful human control. Such weapons are unacceptable, and there is an increasingly urgent need to prevent their development and deployment.

'Stopping Killer Robots: Country Positions on Banning Fully Autonomous Weapons and Retaining Human Control'¹, a new report released last night by Human Rights Watch, reviews the policies of the 97 countries that have publicly elaborated their views on killer robots since 2013. The vast majority regard human control and decision-making as critical to the acceptability and legality of weapons systems. Most of these countries have expressed their desire for a new treaty to retain human control over the use of armed force, including 30 states that explicitly seek to ban fully autonomous weapons.

"Removing human control from the use of force is now widely regarded as a grave threat to humanity that, like climate change, deserves urgent multilateral action", Mary Wareham, Arms Division Advocacy Director at Human Rights Watch and Coordinator of the global Campaign to Stop Killer Robots (KRC), said yesterday. "An international ban treaty is the only effective way to deal with the serious challenges raised by fully autonomous weapons."²

Despite repeated calls from the Aotearoa New Zealand Campaign to Stop Killer Robots (ANZKRC) and others for New Zealand to take action on killer robots at both the national and international levels, New Zealand's stance remains disappointingly weak. In 2013, the government stated it would develop national policy on killer robots³ but this has not yet been done.

New Zealand diplomatic representatives have stated in international forums that governments should work with civil society to develop and implement effective solutions to the challenges raised by new technologies such as fully autonomous weapons⁴, but this has not happened to any discernible degree.

While New Zealand has been present at the eight Convention on Conventional Weapons (CCW) meetings on fully autonomous weapons systems from 2014 to 2019, it has not spoken up in support of the states who are advocating for new international law to ensure meaningful human control over the use of armed force is retained into the future, and to prohibit the development and deployment of killer robots.

Instead, in April last year, the Minister for Disarmament and Arms Control said "our view is that international law already sets limits" on such weapons and that New Zealand would focus on using

existing law “to make sure there will always be meaningful human control over weapons incorporating autonomy”.⁵

In response, during a Foreign Affairs Select Committee hearing on fully autonomous weapon systems in May 2019⁶, Committee members repeatedly urged New Zealand to take a principled position on fully autonomous weapon systems, but there has been no progress since then.

It is particularly disappointing that New Zealand - which has in the past taken a leading role in the development of new humanitarian disarmament law to prohibit particularly harmful weapons (for example, being actively involved in the negotiations for the 2008 Convention on Cluster Munitions and the 2017 Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons) - has remained on the sidelines of the international debate about killer robots.

The current election provides an opportunity for all who are concerned about the development and deployment of fully autonomous weapon systems to check out political party’s positions on killer robots by asking questions based on the ANZKRC’s two priorities for action:

- development of national policy leading to legislation to prohibit the development, production or use of fully autonomous weapons systems in Aotearoa New Zealand; and
- for New Zealand to fully support the immediate start of negotiations on a new international treaty to prohibit autonomous weapons and to retain meaningful human control over the use of armed force.

Further information: Aotearoa New Zealand Campaign on Killer Robots, <http://stopkillerrobots.org.nz> Campaign to Stop Killer Robots, <http://www.stopkillerrobots.org> Human Rights Watch reporting on killer robots, <https://www.hrw.org/topic/arms/killer-robots>

Background information

“It is abundantly clear that retaining meaningful human control over the use of force is an ethical imperative, a legal necessity, and a moral obligation. All countries need to respond with urgency by opening negotiations on a new international ban treaty.” Mary Wareham, Coordinator, Global Campaign to Stop Killer Robots¹⁷

Since Human Rights Watch and other nongovernmental organizations began the Campaign to Stop Killer Robots in 2013, the need to respond to concerns over lethal autonomous weapons systems, another term for fully autonomous weapons, has steadily climbed the international agenda.

A growing number of policymakers, artificial intelligence experts, private companies, international and domestic organizations, and ordinary individuals have endorsed the call to ban fully autonomous weapons. United Nations Secretary-General António Guterres has repeatedly urged countries to prohibit weapons systems that could, by themselves, target and attack human beings, calling such weapons “morally repugnant and politically unacceptable.”

There is widespread acknowledgment that technological developments are enabling militaries to incorporate autonomy into weapons systems. Britain, China, Israel, Russia, South Korea, and the United States are investing heavily in the development of military applications of artificial intelligence systems, while Australia, Turkey, and other countries are also making investments.

There have been eight Convention on Conventional Weapons (CCW) meetings on lethal autonomous weapons systems from 2014 to 2019.

Austria, Brazil, and Chile have proposed negotiations on a legally binding instrument to ensure meaningful human control over the critical functions of weapons systems. A small number of military powers - most notably Russia and the United States - have blocked progress towards regulation, as they are developing air, land, and sea-based autonomous weapons systems. Decisions at the CCW are by consensus, which allows just a few or even a single country to block an agreement sought by a majority.

The Covid-19 pandemic has now forced the postponement of the first 2020 CCW meeting on killer robots, which was supposed to open at the UN in Geneva on August 10.

The 30 countries calling for a ban on killer robots are: Algeria, Argentina, Austria, Bolivia, Brazil, Chile, China (use only), Colombia, Costa Rica, Cuba, Djibouti, Ecuador, El Salvador, Egypt, Ghana, Guatemala, the Holy See, Iraq, Jordan, Mexico, Morocco, Namibia, Nicaragua, Pakistan, Panama, Peru, the State of Palestine, Uganda, Venezuela, and Zimbabwe.

The Campaign to Stop Killer Robots is a coalition of more than 160 nongovernmental organizations in 65 countries that is working to pre-emptively ban fully autonomous weapons and retain meaningful human control over the use of force.

The Aotearoa New Zealand Campaign to Stop Killer Robots is coordinated by Peace Movement Aotearoa, a founding member of the global Campaign, and is supported by: Artificial Intelligence Forum of New Zealand, Anglican Pacifist Fellowship, Christian World Service, Human Rights Foundation, Human Rights Lawyers Association, Pax Christi Aotearoa New Zealand, Peace Movement Aotearoa, Quaker Peace and Service, The Peace Place, and Women's International League for Peace and Freedom Aotearoa.

References

¹ 'Stopping Killer Robots: Country Positions on Banning Fully Autonomous Weapons and Retaining Human Control', Human Rights Watch, 10 August 2020, <https://www.hrw.org/node/375914>

² As at note above

³ Minister of Foreign Affairs' reply to Aotearoa New Zealand Campaign to Stop Killer Robots, 12 July 2013 , available at <http://stopkillerrobots.org.nz>

⁴ See, for example, New Zealand Statement to the UN General Assembly First Committee on Disarmament and International Security, October 30, 2013, http://www.reachingcriticalwill.org/images/documents/Disarmament-fora/1com/1com13/statements/30Oct_NZ.pdf

⁵ Minister for Disarmament and Arms Control's reply to Aotearoa New Zealand Campaign to Stop Killer Robots, 16 April 2019, available at <http://stopkillerrobots.org.nz>

⁶ Foreign Affairs, Defence and Trade Select Committee Briefing on autonomous weapon systems, 2 May 2019 , available at <http://stopkillerrobots.org.nz>

⁷ 'Killer Robots: Growing Support for a Ban', Human Rights Watch, 10 August 2020, <https://www.hrw.org/news/2020/08/10/killer-robots-growing-support-ban>