



Statement of the Permanent Mission of the Holy See
to the United Nations and Other International Organizations in Geneva at the
**2022 Group of Governmental Experts on Lethal Autonomous Weapons Systems
of the Convention on Certain Conventional Weapons**
Geneva, 9 March 2022

Mr. President,

At the time the current meeting of this Group of Governmental Experts takes place, our gaze is inevitably directed towards the conflict in Ukraine, without forgetting the other ongoing conflicts that affect the common humanity and inherent dignity we all share. The tragic absurdity of conflicts all over the world has to stop.

As stressed by Pope Francis, *“dialogue and fraternity are all the more urgently needed.. conflicts are exacerbated by the abundance of weapons. Those who possess weapons will eventually use them, since a person cannot love with offensive weapons in his hands”*¹. In this regard, the development and employment of autonomous weapons systems could have terrible and unforeseen consequences. Indeed, as the Holy See has stressed time and time before, the challenges presented by LAWS are not limited only to the realm of IHL, but they also raise potential and serious implications for peace and stability.

Mr. President,

The Holy See Delegation is grateful for the opportunity to share its views on proposals of possible measures, including taking into account the example of existing protocols within the Convention, and other options related to the normative and operational framework on emerging technologies in the area of Lethal Autonomous Weapons Systems (LAWS). The work of this GGE becomes even more urgent in light of the lack of progress made in the last two years, which is another alarming indicator that LAWS are a matter of increased national military and political interests.

As affirmed in the preamble of the CCW, the High Contracting Parties recognized *“the importance of pursuing every effort which may contribute to progress towards general and complete disarmament under strict and effective international control”* and reaffirmed *“the need to continue the codification and progressive development of the rules of international law applicable in armed conflict”*.

For these reasons, in order to prevent an arms race and the increase of inequalities, instability and multiple conflicts, the Holy See deems it urgent that the CCW, by making use of its flexible and adaptive structure, adopt an ambitious forward-looking approach through the commencement of negotiations of a legally binding instrument to address the issues raised by LAWS. Such negotiations, building on the valuable work carried out in the GGE throughout the years, will be crucial in agreeing on important elements, including characteristics, the different relevant levels of autonomy encompassed, the scope of operation (defensive/offensive) and specific regulations and prohibitions.

Mr. President,

Last December the Holy See submitted a position paper on LAWS to the Sixth Review Conference of the CCW.² I would like to reiterate that the purpose of this contribution was twofold: first, to present some of the ethical and legal concerns that the Holy See has been raising since the beginning of the discussion on LAWS; and second, to submit to other High Contracting Parties certain elements for a possible way forward.

¹ Cf. Address of Pope Francis to the Diplomatic Corps accredited to the Holy See, 10 January 2022.

² Cf. Document CCW/CONF.VI/WP.3 “Translating Ethical Concerns into a Normative and Operational Framework for Lethal Autonomous Weapons Systems” submitted by the Holy See to the Sixth Review Conference of the CCW, 13-17 December 2021.

To respond to the call voiced by numerous Delegations to focus on concrete ideas to move forward, I will not linger here on the many ethical challenges that the Holy See has raised time and time again. This Delegation would rather suggest a way forward on how to translate these ethical concerns into a practical, concrete outcome. In the view of the Holy See, it is imperative to ensure adequate, meaningful, and consistent human supervision over weapons systems: only humans are able to see the results of their actions and understand the connections between cause and effect. This would not be the case with LAWS which could never “understand” the meaning of their actions. In this regard:

1. Adequate human supervision means that the human being introduces sufficient conditions, in the management of weapons systems, to preserve the aforementioned ethical principles and to ensure compliance with IHL.

2. Meaningful human supervision implies that, ultimately, there is always the reference to the human person that must guide the research, development, and use of weapons systems, even in the absence of specific legal regulations, as implied by the “Martens Clause”.

3. Consistent human supervision entails that at no time the weapons systems would have the capacity to contradict what the human authority has prescribed as the main purpose or result of its intervention. It would be, in fact, inconsistent that a weapon system deployed to fulfill a particular mission could begin to adopt behavior inconsistent with its prescribed purposes.

From this point of view, it seems that the mentioned principles imply the requirements of predictability and reliability of autonomous systems. Indeed, even if LAWS dispose of degrees of freedom of “behavior”, they must be required in all circumstances to achieve the prescribed ends and implement the required intentions and objectives of the responsible authority. If particular behaviors cannot be controlled at all times, all possible behaviors must always be *a priori* circumscribed. From this point of view, it would therefore be impossible to accept systems capable of “learning” completely new behaviors.³

Mr. President,

As the Holy See has already suggested, besides convening the negotiations of a legally binding instrument to address the challenges raised by LAWS and, in the meantime, establishing a moratorium on their development and use, it could be desirable for States, in the longer term and in a much broader scope than LAWS and the CCW *per se*, to consider establishing an International Organization for Artificial Intelligence, to facilitate, and ensure the right of all States to participate in, the fullest possible exchange of scientific and technological information for peaceful uses and towards the common good of all the human family.⁴

Also in light of the increasing dangers of cyberattacks, it becomes ever more important to place the blossoming of human ingenuity at the service of humanity for peaceful uses and integral human development. The research on emerging technologies should be oriented towards combating the real challenges that affect the international community. This fight will not be won by developing sophisticated autonomous weapons systems, but by placing technology at the service of the human person and by orienting it towards the common good. Ultimately, the Holy See is mindful that this will be a choice that goes well beyond the scope of the CCW and the discussion on LAWS. But it is a choice that must be made by, and will have consequences on, humanity as a whole.

Thank you, Mr. President.

³ Cf. Statement of the Holy See to the Sixth Review Conference of the CCW, 15 December 2021, available at: <https://nuntiusge.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/12/CCW-Rev.-Con-Statement-on-LAWS-15-December-2021.pdf>

⁴ Ibid.