



Statement of H.E. Archbishop Ettore Balestrero, Apostolic Nuncio
Permanent Observer of the Holy See to the United Nations
and Other International Organizations in Geneva, Head of Delegation to the
**2023 Meeting of the High Contracting Parties to the Convention on Prohibitions or Restrictions
on the Use of Certain Conventional Weapons Which May Be Deemed to Be Excessively
Injurious or to Have Indiscriminate Effects (CCW)**

Agenda Item 7 - General Exchange of Views
Geneva, 15 November 2023

Señor presidente,

En primer lugar, la Delegación de la Santa Sede desea felicitarle por su elección para presidir esta reunión y expresarle también su apreciación por el trabajo preparatorio que ha realizado con su equipo.

Mr. Chair,

The CCW and its Protocols are intended to be an important part of the fabric of international humanitarian law (IHL), which is a means to protect innocent civilians, to limit and, to the greatest extent possible, to avoid the human suffering that is provoked by armed conflicts, the negative consequences of which reverberate for generations.

In the deep darkness of conflicts, IHL must remain an essential bulwark to safeguard the dignity of every person. Sadly, it is evident that even today, perhaps even more than in the past, this dignity is all too often violated in the name of military or political imperatives. The price is inevitably measured in terms of human lives.

The so-called balance between strategic and military “necessity” and humanitarian considerations is extremely difficult to define, and even more difficult to determine before seeing the results of a military operation. However, how many dead, wounded and disabled persons must be counted before we condemn certain military behavior as unacceptable and, consequently, we determine that such a “balance” is uneven? This tragic question reveals a direct and obvious offense to human dignity, but it is also a spontaneous cry that arises when one observes the scenes of conflicts that we witness every day. And the answer unfortunately, risks being even more tragic than the question, because so-called strategic and political “imperatives”, as well as economic and geopolitical interests, triumph over the respect due to every human person.

Mr. Chair,

On the occasion of this meeting of the High Contracting Parties, the Holy See wishes to raise the following three points:

1) The law inscribed in the conscience of every person and of all peoples includes the moral obligation to avoid armed conflicts, and, in the sad event that such conflicts do occur, to protect civilians from their consequences. Pope Francis invites us to “*look once more at all those civilians whose killing was considered ‘collateral damage’*”, recalling, in conscience, that “even in cases of self-defense, peace is the ultimate goal”². In this regard, “we must always help to find a small opening for mediation and reconciliation; we must never give in to the temptation of considering the other as merely an enemy to destroy, but rather as a person endowed with intrinsic dignity, created by God in his image [...]. Even amid the lacerations of war, we must never tire of remembering that every person is immensely holy”.³

2) The Holy See is concerned about the use of explosive weapons, especially in populated areas, which are increasingly becoming less and less “conventional” and more and more “weapons of mass destruction”, while causing displacement and wreaking havoc on towns, schools, hospitals, places of worship and infrastructures that are vital to the civilian population. The dramatic reality on the ground documents the devastating impact of the use of explosive weapons in populated areas.

This is why, a year ago, in Dublin, the Holy See endorsed the “Political Declaration on Strengthening the Protection of Civilians from the Humanitarian Consequences arising from the use of Explosive Weapons in Populated Areas (EWIPA)”, urging that this Declaration be applied in a concrete way, in order to shift from the paradigm of “collateral damage” to that of “intended protection” and to truly minimize, or, better still, avoid the loss of innocent human lives.⁴

3) Regarding Lethal Autonomous Weapons Systems (LAWS), while it is encouraging to note a growing convergence on the need for concrete action, it is disheartening that, after a decade of engaging discussions, few concrete results have been achieved. In line with the aspirations expressed in its Preamble, the CCW has the task to “continue the codification and progressive development of the rules of international law applicable in armed conflict.”⁵

The Holy See’s support for the negotiation of a legally binding instrument on LAWS and, in the meantime, for an immediate moratorium on their development or use, is well-known. This position, which also includes several ethical and legal implications concerning LAWS, has been extensively presented over the years, in the context of the work of the Group of Governmental Experts. In this regard, my Delegation will take the floor during the relevant agenda item. At this point, however, I would like to reiterate that the development of autonomous weapons systems could have unforeseen consequences beyond the *jus in bello* and it also raise serious implications for peace and stability. Indeed, the increased and widespread use of armed drones, including kamikaze and swarming drones, is already a grim foreshadowing of a future nightmare which could and should be avoided with the joint efforts of all stakeholders, as a true family of nations.

¹ Pope Francis, *Fratelli tutti*, N. 261.

² Pope Francis, Video Message with the prayer intention for the month of April, 30 March 2023.

³ Pope Francis, Address to the Participants of the IV International Course for the Formation of Military Chaplains to International Humanitarian Law, 26 October 2015.

⁴ Cf. Statement of the Holy See Delegation to the adoption of the “Political Declaration on Strengthening the Protection of Civilians from the Humanitarian Consequences arising from the use of Explosive Weapons in Populated Areas (EWIPA)”, Dublin, 18 November 2022.

⁵ CCW, Preamble.

As proposed by the Holy See during the Sixth Review Conference of the CCW in 2021, I would like to reiterate that it could be helpful, even in the broader context than that offered by the LAWS and the CCW *per se*, to consider the establishment of an International Agency 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 for the common good of the entire human family.⁶

Finally, I would like to inform Delegations that Pope Francis has decided to devote his 2024 Message for the World Day of Peace to the theme of “Artificial Intelligence and Peace”.

Mr. Chair,

In an increasingly globalized world, it is a deceptive and self-defeating logic to assume that the security and peace of some individuals can be separated from the collective security and peace of others. When people face the consequences of armed conflicts, tragically often marked by the very depths of inhumanity and suffering, it becomes very difficult to think of reconciliation. Yet, ultimately, “true peace is made possible only through forgiveness.”⁷ In conclusion, allow me to renew Pope Francis' call that “not weapons, not terrorism, not war, but compassion, justice and dialogue are the fitting means for building peace⁸”.

Thank you, Mr. Chair.

⁶ 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.

⁷ John Paul II, Message for the 2002 World Day of Peace.

⁸ Pope Francis, Audience to the Delegation of Conference of European Rabbis, 6 November 2023.