



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,
to the **2024 Group of Governmental Experts (GGE) on Emerging Technologies in the Area of
Lethal Autonomous Weapons Systems (LAWS) - General Exchange of Views**
Geneva, 4 March 2024

Mr. Chair,

In his Message for the 2024 World Day of Peace, Pope Francis affirmed that the “research on emerging technologies in the area of so-called Lethal Autonomous Weapon Systems, including the weaponization of artificial intelligence, is a cause for grave ethical concern.”¹

As conflicts and divisions continue to affect humanity, “there can be no escaping serious ethical questions related to the armaments sector”². The urgency of this matter is increasing due to the widespread development and use of armed drones, including kamikaze and swarming drones. This has led to a “lessened perception of the devastation caused [...] and the burden of responsibility for their use, resulting in an even more cold and detached approach to the immense tragedy of war.”³

Mr. Chair,

Autonomous weapons systems cannot be held morally responsible subjects. Human beings possess a unique capacity for moral judgment and ethical decision-making that cannot be replicated by a complex set of algorithms, and that capacity cannot be reduced to programming a machine that, however “intelligent”, remains a machine. If operating without any direct human supervision, such systems may make errors in identifying the intended targets due to unidentified biases induced by their self-learning capabilities⁴. Therefore, it is crucial to ensure sufficient, meaningful, and consistent human oversight over weapon systems equipped with artificial intelligence functions.

¹ Pope Francis, Message for the 57th World Day of Peace, 1 January 2024.

² *Ibid.*

³ *Ibid.*

⁴ 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.

Autonomous weapons systems lack the ability to comprehend the consequences of causing ‘excessive or unnecessary suffering’, engaging in indiscriminate killing, or adhering to the principles of humanity⁵. These expressions, which are codified in IHL, require interpretation, good faith, and prudent judgement, all of which are uniquely irreplaceable human traits.

Machines, being objects and not subjects, cannot truly think, feel, decide or be held accountable for their actions. They can only execute instructions and simulate human behavior. Therefore, it is incorrect to say that machines can ‘decide’ or ‘judge’. Despite their complexity, machines cannot have the final word on human beings!

Mr. Chair,

The Holy See has been a vocal supporter of negotiation of a legally binding instrument on LAWS and, in the meantime, of an immediate moratorium on their development or use. It is increasingly urgent to deliver concrete results given the pace of technological advancements. This is also mindful of the decade of dedicated discussion on LAWS.

As we have been tasked to “further consider and formulate a set of elements of an instrument to address the issue of LAWS”⁶, the Holy See encourages full use of this GGE to work specifically on the scope of prohibitions and regulations of weapon systems based on their degree of autonomy, keeping firmly at the center of our deliberations the fundamental reference to the dignity of the human person.

In conclusion, the Holy See reasserts “its strong conviction as to the fundamentally inhumane nature of war” and “its firm belief that the ultimate goal, that which is worthy of the calling of man and of human civilization, is the abolition of war”⁷. The development of ever more sophisticated weaponry, even with the purpose of reducing collateral damage, is not a long-lasting solution. Just like any form of evil, war originates in the human heart (cf. Mt 15: 19; Mk 7: 20-23). Therefore, the real solution lies in the conversion to a culture of peace that places technological advancements at the service of humanity, of integral human development, and of the common good.

Thank you.

⁵ Cf. Art. 1(2) Additional Protocol I to the Geneva Convention.

⁶ Cf. Paragraph 20, Final Report of the 2023 Meeting of the High Contracting Parties to the CCW (CCW/MSP/2023/7).

⁷ Cf. Declaration of the Holy See upon ratification of Additional Protocol I to the Geneva Conventions.