

AWS DIPLOMACY REPORT

Civil society perspectives on the Informal
Consultation on Lethal Autonomous Weapons
Systems
12–13 May 2025

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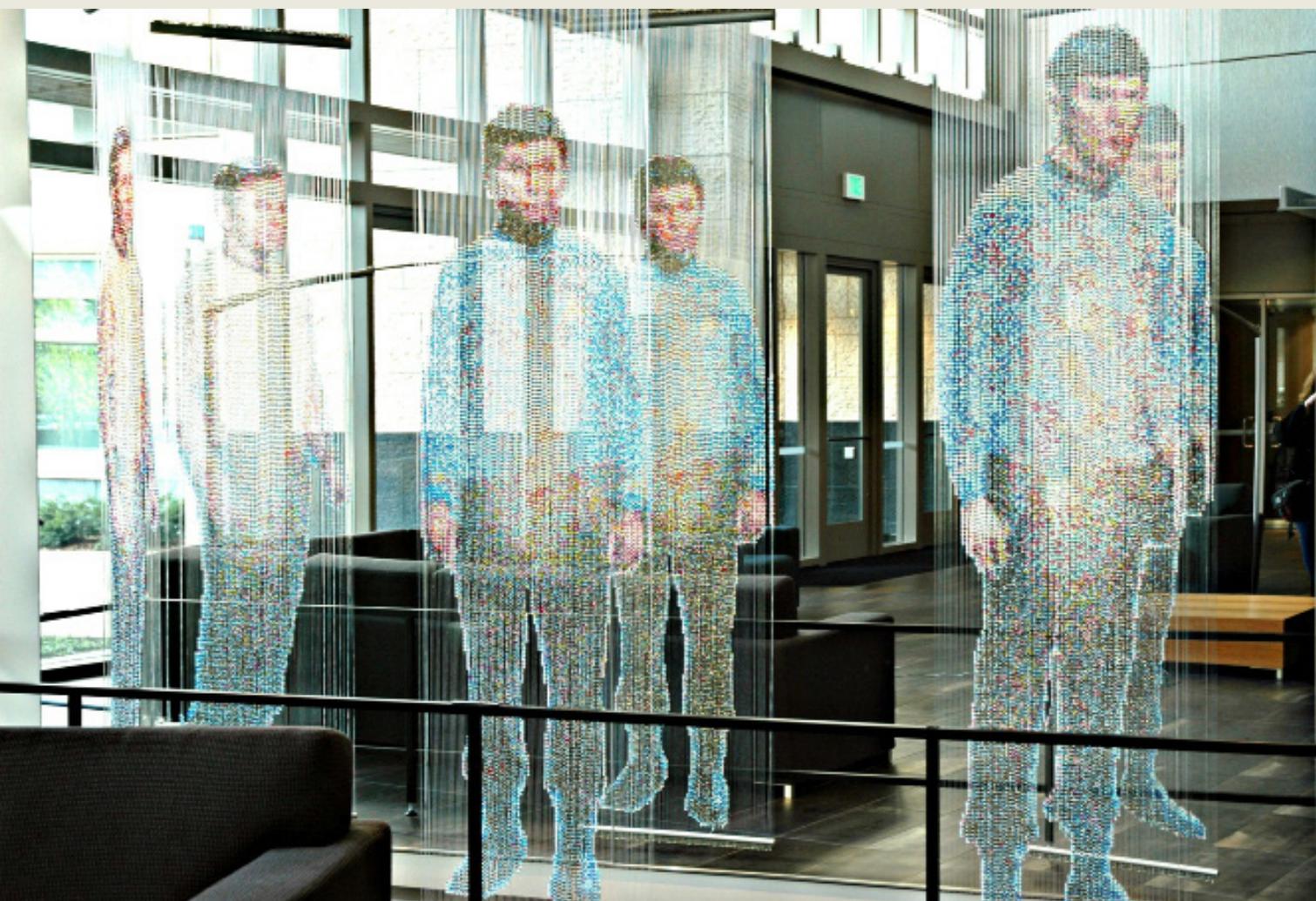


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Reaching Critical Will



WILPF
WOMEN'S INTERNATIONAL
LEAGUE FOR PEACE & FREEDOM

Editorial: To Live Long and Prosper, We Must Ban Autonomous Weapons

Laura Varella | Reaching Critical Will of the Women's International League for Peace and Freedom

On 12–13 May 2025, delegations will meet at the United Nations (UN) in New York for an **informal consultation on lethal autonomous weapons systems** (LAWS). Amidst growing militarism and the dismantling of multilateralism, this is a crucial moment to advance ongoing discussions of a treaty prohibiting autonomous weapons.

Time of increasing militarism

A quick glance of recent news reveals that we are facing challenging times. The genocide of Palestinians is ongoing, despite calls from states, the UN, civil society, and people worldwide against Israel's actions. The new administration in the United States (US) has declared war against immigrants, trans and nonbinary people, and all those opposing the new government and its discriminatory policies. With increasing geopolitical tensions, states are resorting to militarism: the European Union (EU), Australia, China, India, Japan, the Republic of Korea, Saudi Arabia, Türkiye, the United Kingdom (UK), and many others have announced their intention to increase their military budgets.

Against this harrowing scenario, the arms industry is thriving. In addition to the traditional companies that have been fuelling the military-industrial-complex in the last decades, there are new actors at play. The tech industry is increasing its influence over governments, securing highly profitable government contracts. In this context, autonomous weapon systems become critical: companies want to make profit out of their development, and governments want to acquire them, motivated by an arms race logic.

Just in recent months, the US-based company Anduril **announced** that it is building a 1 billion USD factory that could “eventually produce tens of thousands of autonomous systems and weapons each year.” The company is also involved in **partnership** between the US and India to develop maritime drones and counter-drone systems. Companies from the **Republic of Korea, Türkiye, and many other countries** are also developing weapons with increasing levels of autonomy.

However, there is no shortage of concerns regarding autonomous weapons. Many experts have been warning against the range of legal, ethical, and humanitarian problems arising from these systems. In a racist, colonial, patriarchal, and capitalist world, which is facing growing fascist trends, autonomous weapons **can only be used** as tools to divide, subjugate, and control, resulting in ongoing war and suffering.

Nevertheless, there are many who have been fighting to prevent our reality from becoming the plot of futuristic cyberpunk movie. States, international organisations, civil society, and academia have been engaging in multilateral discussions about autonomous weapons for over a decade. Throughout these years, they have built a rich body of knowledge around these systems. Now it is time to move forward and take the next step: starting negotiations of a legally binding instrument prohibiting autonomous weapons.

Background of discussions at the UN about AWS

Autonomous weapon systems (AWS) have been discussed in the United Nations for over a decade. In 2013, Christof Heyns, then UN special rapporteur on extrajudicial, summary or arbitrary executions,

first warned about the concerns around autonomous weapons in a report to the Human Rights Council. That same year, the Convention on Certain Conventional Weapons (CCW) decided to convene in 2014 an Informal Meeting of Experts to “discuss the questions related to emerging technologies in the area of lethal autonomous weapons systems (LAWS).” In 2016, the CCW established the Group of Governmental Experts on Emerging Technologies in the Area of Lethal Autonomous Weapons Systems (GGE on LAWS). Since then, the Group has been meeting annually, but it has not managed to start negotiations of a legally binding instrument on autonomous weapons, despite the majority of states supporting this.

The current mandate of the Group, adopted in 2023, is to “further consider and formulate, by consensus, a set of elements of an instrument in the area of lethal autonomous weapons systems.” According to the mandate, the GGE needs to submit a report to the Seventh Review Conference of the CCW in 2026, but it should complete its work as soon as possible, preferably before the end of 2025. With the deadline fast approaching, there are concerns about whether the GGE will successfully fulfil its mandate, or more importantly, if it will ever start formal negotiations of a legally binding instrument. These negotiations have been consistently blocked by a handful of heavily militarised states, including Russia, Israel, India, Australia, the Republic of Korea, and the United States.

These states have adopted several actions that have been detrimental to the majority’s wish of negotiating an international treaty on AWS. Some of them have stalled and/or prevented substantive discussions using procedural arguments; objected to the participation of observers, which includes civil society, academia, intergovernmental and international organisations; threatened to block the adoption of reports unless certain conditions were met; tried to narrow down the scope of discussions to only international humanitarian law (IHL), excluding other areas of international law, such as international human rights law (IHRL) and international criminal law, as well as ethical considerations; and tried to create loopholes by insisting on keeping the term “lethal” in the characterisation of AWS, which could result in excluding weapons used to damage objects or to cause injury.

All this has been possible because the CCW operates under the consensus rule, which has been interpreted as a “veto power” by some states. When they don’t agree with a discussion or decision, they prevent it from happening by not joining consensus, even if this means going against the wish of the majority.

Luckily, multilateral discussions have not been restricted to the CCW. In recent years, there have been several international and regional conferences related to AWS, including the Responsible AI in the Military Domain Summit (REAIM 2023) in the Hague, the Netherlands on 15–16 February 2023; the Latin American and the Caribbean Conference of Social and Humanitarian Impact of Autonomous Weapons in Belén, Costa Rica on 23–24 February 2023; the CARICOM Conference: The Human Impacts of Autonomous Weapons in Port of Spain, Trinidad and Tobago on 5–6 September 2023; the Manila Meeting on Indo-Pacific Perspectives on Autonomous Weapons Systems in the Philippines on 13–14 December 2023; the Inaugural Plenary Meeting for the Political Declaration on Responsible Military Use of Artificial Intelligence and Autonomy in the United States on 19–20 March 2024; the Regional Conference on the Peace and Security Aspect of Autonomous Weapons Systems: An ECOWAS Perspective in Freetown, Sierra Leone on 17–18 April 2024; the 2024 Vienna Conference on Autonomous Weapons Systems in Austria on 29–30 April 2024; and the Responsible AI in the Military Domain Summit (REAIM 2024) in Seoul, Republic of Korea on 9–10 September 2024.

In 2023, the General Assembly adopted the first resolution on AWS, which mandated the UN Secretary-General (UNSG) to seek the views of states, civil society, academia, and others about LAWS,

and submit a report to the General Assembly. The UNSG published his report in August 2024, in which he reiterated his call for the conclusion, by 2026, of a legally binding instrument to prohibit and regulate autonomous weapon systems.

In 2024, the General Assembly **adopted** a new **resolution**, this time to have informal consultations on AWS. This meeting is an opportunity to build on the discussions held in the GGE and elsewhere and to advocate for the start of negotiations of a treaty banning AWS.

Opportunities at the informal consultation

The upcoming informal consultation will provide an inclusive space for civil society to participate actively, along with states that do not have representation at the GGE in Geneva because they are not party to the CCW.

The consultation will also be a great opportunity to discuss critical issues that remain missing from the current debate at the GGE. According to the **programme**, the meeting is structured around sessions about humanitarian, legal, security, technological, and ethical considerations. Under these sessions, participants can highlight their concerns around human rights, international criminal law, risk of proliferation, use of AWS by domestic law enforcement, environmental impacts, and more.

An important issue that needs to be further discussed is a prohibition of anti-personnel AWS. In the last GGE meeting, the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC), Stop Killer Robots, the Holy See, and Mexico reiterated their views that the Group should consider an explicit prohibition on anti-personnel AWS. The ICRC emphasised that this would give clarity for militaries and developers and would have a far greater impact on reducing the risk of strikes against people protected in armed conflict. Stop Killers Robots also underlined that it would be impossible to build a software system that can accurately distinguish combatants from civilians, and raised several other humanitarian and ethical concerns that could only be effectively addressed through a prohibition of anti-personnel systems. The upcoming consultation is a good opportunity to unpack these concerns and defend such a prohibition.

Participants at the informal consultation can also use the opportunity to address the increasing use of artificial intelligence (AI) in military, policing, and border enforcement activities. We are **seeing harms** from such use already; the use of AI for identifying, targeting, tracking, incarcerating, deporting, and killing people is already happening. Those working on AWS must take into account this reality in our work to prevent further harm and put an end to that already being committed.

Several other issues can and should be raised by states; the recommendations provided by Stop Killer Robots further down in this edition can be useful in this regard. Overall, states should make the most of this opportunity to help building political will towards the start of negotiations of a legally binding instrument on AWS. Like the **Star Trek character Spock** would say if he participated in UN discussions about autonomous weapons, it is illogical to pursue a technology that risks the well-being of humanity. As an ambassador himself, he was involved in difficult diplomatic negotiations (all fictional), but never flinched from doing what was right for the world (in his case, the galaxy). To “live long and prosper,” we must do like Spock and act now to secure a future free from autonomous weapons.

Autonomous Weapon Systems and Threats to Human Rights

Bonnie Docherty | Human Rights Watch and Harvard Law School's International Human Rights Clinic

Autonomous weapon systems endanger numerous obligations and principles of international human rights law. Governments and human rights experts have recognised this threat since the systems first attracted international attention at a 2013 session of the United Nations Human Rights Council. Shortly thereafter, however, states parties to the **Convention on Conventional Weapons** (CCW) took the lead on the multilateral discussions, and they focused on international humanitarian law issues.

A new report from Human Rights Watch and Harvard Law School's International Human Rights Clinic (IHRC), ***A Hazard to Human Rights: Autonomous Weapons Systems and Digital Decision-Making***, aims to inform and reinvigorate discussions of the human rights implications of these weapon systems. It provides an in-depth examination of the concerns during both armed conflict and law enforcement operations. The report finds autonomous weapon systems would contravene the rights to life, peaceful assembly, privacy, and remedy as well as the principles of human dignity and non-discrimination.

A Hazard to Human Rights was released prior to the UN General Assembly informal consultations on autonomous weapon systems. The meeting offers an important opportunity to broaden the scope of discussions and thus highlight and explore the risks to fundamental human rights.

To advance protection for human rights and humanity, participants at the informal consultations should address the human rights concerns raised by autonomous weapon systems, including by elaborating on the infringements of specific obligations and principles. States and others should also use human rights law to bolster the case for a new treaty and ensure the treaty addresses the range of threats to human rights.

A history of human rights concerns

States, international organisations, civil society groups, and many human rights experts have raised awareness of the human rights implications of autonomous weapon systems since the **2013 report** to the Human Rights Council from Christof Heyns, the then-UN special rapporteur on extrajudicial, summary, or arbitrary executions. Numerous additional reports from the UN Secretary-General and other UN bodies and experts have explored human rights issues. While focusing on problems of international humanitarian law, also known as the laws of war, many CCW states parties have noted in their meetings that international human rights law is also relevant and highlighted the gravity of the risks posed by autonomous weapon systems.

Despite this interest in the topic, few of these reports and statements have explored the issue in great depth. Due to its broader mandate, the consultations offer an opportunity to begin a more detailed discussion. *A Hazard to Human Rights* seeks to support that discussion by providing a deeper and broader analysis of the human rights implications. The meeting's session on "**Legal Considerations**" will address international human rights law and give participants room to elaborate on their concerns and ask questions of opening panelists.

Use of force: rights to life and peaceful assembly

Autonomous weapon systems, which select and engage targets based on sensor processing rather than human inputs, implicate two human rights in their use of force: the rights to life and peaceful assembly.

The right not to be arbitrarily deprived of life—the foundation for all other human rights—requires that the use of force be necessary to achieve a legitimate aim and be applied in a proportionate manner. The right also specifies that lethal force may only be used as a last resort to protect human life. Autonomous weapon systems would face serious difficulties in meeting this three-part test. Autonomous weapon systems would lack the ability to interpret complex situations and to accurately approximate human judgment and emotion, elements essential to determining the necessity and proportionality of force. They also could not communicate effectively with an individual to defuse a situation and ensure that lethal force is a last option.

The right to peaceful assembly, which is particularly relevant to the use of force in law enforcement situations, is essential to democracy and the enjoyment of other human rights. It requires police officers to protect peaceful protests and use non-violent means before resorting to the use of force, in accordance with similar criteria as those for the right to life. Autonomous weapon systems, which would lack human judgment and could not be pre-programmed or trained to address every situation, would find it challenging to draw the line between protesters who pose a risk to life and those who do not, even if using violence. They would be unlikely to have the capability to accurately assess when and how much force was appropriate. Finally, the use or threat of use of autonomous weapon systems could strike fear among protesters and thus have a chilling effect on free expression and peaceful assembly.

Core principles: dignity and non-discrimination

Autonomous weapon systems would also undermine two principles at the heart of international human rights law: dignity and non-discrimination.

The principle of human dignity underlies all human rights. Autonomous weapon systems would contravene this foundational principle, which grants all people inherent worth that is both universal and inviolable. These machines would kill without the uniquely human capacity to understand or respect the true value of a human life or significance of its loss because they are not living beings. Furthermore, they would instrumentalise and dehumanise their targets by relying on algorithms that reduce people to data points.

The principle of non-discrimination calls for the protection and promotion of human rights for all people, irrespective of race, sex and gender, ability, or other status under the law. Autonomous weapon systems would likely be discriminatory for multiple reasons. Biases of developers could influence a system's design and later decision-making. Once an autonomous weapon system using artificial intelligence (AI) is deployed, the inability to understand how and why the system makes determinations could prevent a human operator from scrutinising recommended targets and intervening to correct errors.

Lifecycle of weapon system: rights to privacy and remedy

In addition to infringing on human rights at the time of their use, autonomous weapon systems would threaten human rights, including the rights to privacy and remedy, across the systems' lifecycle.

The right to privacy protects people from unlawful or arbitrary interference in their personal life from the time of the autonomous weapon systems' creation. The development and use of autonomous weapon systems that are based on AI technology could violate this right because their development, testing,

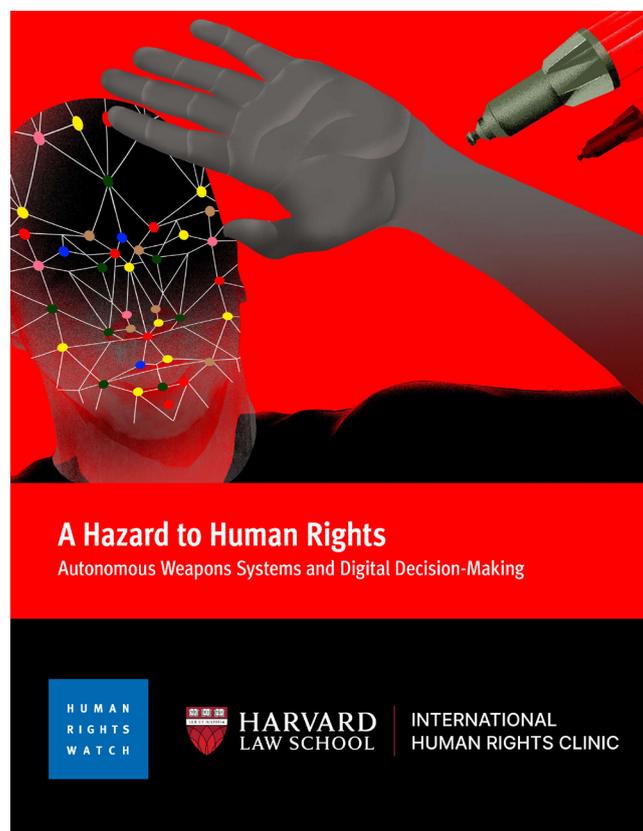
training, and use would likely require mass surveillance. To avoid being arbitrary, such data-gathering practices must be both necessary for reaching a legitimate aim and proportionate to the end sought. Mass surveillance fails both these requirements.

The right to remedy seeks to deter future violations of the law and provide retribution for victims. It is triggered at the end of an autonomous weapon system's lifecycle, that is, after it has applied force. There are obstacles to holding individual operators criminally liable for the unpredictable actions of a machine they cannot understand, in particular because autonomous weapon systems that rely on AI may make determinations through opaque, "black box" processes. There are also legal challenges to finding programmers and developers responsible under civil law. Thus, the use of autonomous weapon systems would create an accountability gap.

Need for a new treaty

Human actors, whether soldiers on the battlefield or police officers responding to law enforcement situations, violate human rights, sometimes egregiously. Unlike autonomous weapon systems, for which many of the concerns raised in this report are intrinsic and immutable, however, people can and do uphold the rights of others every day. People can also face, understand, and abide by the consequences of their actions when they do not. Machines cannot engage in any of those actions.

The threats to international human rights law posed by autonomous weapon systems call for a new legally binding instrument. The instrument should prohibit autonomous weapon systems that inherently operate without meaningful human control or that target people. It should also contain regulations to ensure meaningful human control over all other autonomous weapon systems; these regulations could include requirements for systems to be understandable and predictable and contain limits on a system's time, space, and targets of operation. Such a treaty should apply under any circumstances to cover situations of law enforcement as well as times of armed conflict and should comprehensively address human rights law violations.



Pushing Forward to a Treaty: Recommendations for States

Stop Killer Robots

A legally binding instrument on autonomous weapon systems is more urgent than ever. While some states continue to pursue autonomy in **weapon systems** and **more and more companies** become involved in this drive, digital dehumanisation in armed conflict is **already contributing** to serious harm. Rising geopolitical tensions provide another reason to act: if states do not agree to strong international rules on autonomous weapons systems, risks to peace and security and the protection of civilians will only increase.

There is a clear way forward. With increasing agreement on some of the key elements of how autonomous weapon systems should be regulated, and **growing international support** for a legally binding instrument, states can and should move to negotiations now.

The informal consultations in New York have a critical role to play. First, they can strengthen the substantive foundations for negotiations by discussing the full range of concerns with autonomous weapon systems and how these should be addressed through new international law. Second, the consultations are a chance for all states with a seat at the UN, international organisations, and civil society to show their commitment to working together to start negotiations as soon as possible.

The **landmark call** of the UN Secretary-General and the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) to negotiate new law by 2026 still stands as a challenge to the international community. All those coming to New York must use these days towards meeting this goal.

Progress and gaps in the policy discussion

Stop Killer Robots is **calling on states** to support an international legally binding instrument on autonomous weapon systems that rejects the automation of killing and ensures meaningful human control over the use of force. This must:

- Prohibit systems that would target people;
- Prohibit systems that do not allow for meaningful human control; and
- Contain positive obligations to ensure that all other systems are used with meaningful human control in practice.

There is now strong convergence amongst states around a “two-tier approach” of explicitly prohibiting certain autonomous weapon systems, such as those that cannot be used in accordance with international law or are ethically unacceptable, and regulating the rest. This is the structure of regulation that Stop Killer Robots wants to see in law.

At the Group of Governmental Experts (GGE) at the Convention on Certain Conventional Weapons (CCW) in Geneva, agreement is also building amongst states around some of the key elements of meaningful human control, particularly when it comes to ensuring systems are used in accordance with international humanitarian law (IHL). For Stop Killer Robots, some of the core components of meaningful human control are that users adequately understand a system and how it interacts with its context, and

that they can sufficiently limit the operation of a system (e.g. in time, space, and type of target), so that a system's effects are only those that were (lawfully) intended. In **current discussions** on the Chair's "rolling text" at the GGE, there is convergence on many of these core points amongst a broad range of states, as well as recognition that systems operating without meaningful human control should be prohibited.

The agreement on these points that is being built amongst states is a solid basis from which they could start treaty negotiations, and is real and positive progress. But the instrument we want to see as the end result of negotiations needs additional crucial elements.

For Stop Killer Robots, a prohibition on anti-personnel autonomous weapon systems must be included in a future legal instrument: this is a key part of our call. We cannot allow machines to target people. This would be an extreme form of **digital dehumanisation**. Anti-personnel systems would inevitably have disproportionate impacts on already marginalised communities through encoding and reproducing our societal biases. It is also hard to see many situations in which such systems could comply with either **international human rights law** or **international humanitarian law**.

The ethical, technological, legal, and humanitarian concerns with systems targeting people need to be more fully discussed so that states can agree on how to respond to them. So far, as noted in the editorial, while this issue has been **recognised by many** (including the **40 states** that endorsed the **Chair's Summary** of Austria's "**Humanity at the Crossroads**" conference), it has not been a focus for discussions in Geneva. The consultations in New York give an opportunity to consider these topics more.

Another key issue is that states have not yet ruled out the use of autonomous weapon systems in law enforcement, even though it is extremely difficult to see how they could be used in compliance with **human rights law** when it comes to borders, security, and policing. States' deliberations on international rules must address this—as well as considering how rules on autonomous weapon systems for situations of armed conflict can adequately reflect human rights and other bodies of law. The informal consultations provide an opportunity to discuss these issues.

Imperatives to act

The New York consultations are also a chance for states to take stock of the developments that show why inclusive negotiations on a treaty are currently so urgent. With the global security context changing, it is crucial for states to look at how autonomous weapon systems pose peace and security risks, such as high-speed unintended escalations in the absence of common rules. Other overarching issues such as the environmental impacts of pursuing greater autonomy in weapons systems—from the energy usage of data centres to conflict pollution—should also be examined by states in the context of the imperative they provide to act.

States must also recognise that the quest for speed through automation, the erosion of meaningful human control in the use of force, and the reduction of people to data points—key issues with autonomous weapon systems—is already having devastating impacts on civilians. For example, "decision-support systems," which could be used as components of autonomous weapon systems, and raise similar concerns, have already **reportedly been used** with minimal human input by Israel in Gaza, contributing to extensive harm. Though a new generation of autonomous weapon systems is not yet in widespread use, their development is being pursued in current conflicts—such as in Ukraine—and by countries such as the US and Russia for strategic reasons.

Autonomous weapon systems are a global governance challenge that will affect all states, and all must be part of the solution, alongside civil society, international organisations, and other stakeholders. It is

clear from the recent regional and international conferences highlighted in the editorial that concern about autonomous weapon systems reaches far beyond states party to the CCW. All forums, including the informal consultations in New York, must be used to advance both policy discussions and political leadership towards negotiating a comprehensive and inclusive treaty.

Recommendations to states for the informal consultations and beyond

Stop Killer Robots urges all states to:

- Attend the informal consultations on autonomous weapons systems;
- Welcome the progress made so far on this topic in all forums, including policy discussions in the CCW; highlight the further issues and rules that need to be considered towards a comprehensive response; and welcome the opportunity to consider these with all states, civil society and other stakeholders, under the UN General Assembly;
- Recognise the harm already being caused by increasing automation, and the risks to people, peace and security that it poses;
- Commit to move forward urgently, building on all the substantial policy and political progress made so far, to negotiate a legally binding instrument with prohibitions and regulations on autonomous weapons systems by 2026;
- Support negotiations in a forum that is inclusive of all states, civil society, and international organisations and where progress cannot be blocked through veto, consensus rules, or their misuse; and
- Commit, at this critical moment and in the context of rising global tensions and instability, to building partnerships across regions and with civil society and other stakeholders to develop new law that strengthens international norms and protects humanity.

For more details and background, see the [Policy Briefing](#) from Stop Killer Robots.

**A Hazard to Human Rights:
Autonomous Weapons Systems
and Digital Decision-Making**

Stop Killer Robots side event
Monday, 12 May | 13:15-14:30
Conference Room 8, 1st basement
United Nations Headquarters, New York

Speakers

Bonnie Docherty
Senior Arms Advisor
Human Rights Watch & Lecturer on
Law at Harvard Law Schools
International Human Rights Clinic

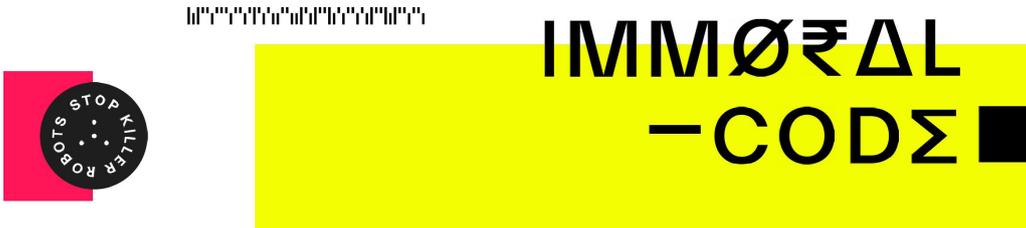
Dr. Matt Mahmoudi,
Researcher/Advisor on Artificial
Intelligence and Human Rights
Amnesty International

Brady Mabe,
Legal Adviser
International Committee
of the Red Cross

Moderator

Nicole van Rooijen
Executive Director
Stop Killer Robots

Permanent Mission
of Austria to the
United Nations in New York



Stop Killer Robots warmly invites you to a special screening of our documentary **Immoral Code** at G Gallery on **Sunday May 11, 2025**

Doors open 18:00
Film starts 19:00

 [G Gallery](#)
[404 Broadway, 2nd floor](#)
[New York, NY 10013](#)

The remarks section of the evening will include speakers from Stop Killer Robots, Human Rights Watch, and Amnesty International. Canapés and drinks will be served throughout the evening.
The event concludes at 21:00

Immoral Code is a documentary that contemplates the impact of Killer Robots in an increasingly automated world - one where machines make decisions over who to kill or what to destroy.

The film examines whether there are situations where it's morally and socially acceptable to take life, and importantly - would a computer know the difference.

Please RSVP to confirm your attendance to
rsvp@stopkillerrobots.org

AWS DIPLOMACY REPORT

Reaching Critical Will (RCW) is the disarmament programme of the Women's International League for Peace and Freedom (WILPF), the oldest feminist peace organisation in the world. RCW works for disarmament and the prohibition of many different weapon systems; confronting militarism and military spending; and exposing gendered aspects of the impact of weapons and disarmament processes with a feminist lens. RCW also monitors and analyses international disarmament processes, providing primary resources, reporting, and civil society coordination at various UN-related forums.



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The *AWS Diplomacy Report* is produced by the Reaching Critical Will programme of the Women's International League for Peace and Freedom (WILPF).

The views expressed in this publication are not necessarily those of WILPF.

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