

Calls mount for action on 'killer robots' after UN talks (Update)

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Activist group the Campaign to Stop Killer Robots insists human beings must be responsible for the final decision to kill

"Robots are not taking over the world", the diplomat leading the first official talks on autonomous weapons assured Friday, seeking to ease criticism over slow progress towards restricting the use of so-called "killer robots".

The United Nations was wrapping up an initial five days of discussions on weapons systems that can identify and destroy targets without human control, which experts say will soon be battle ready.

The meeting of the UN's Convention on Conventional Weapons (CCW) marked an initial step towards an agreed set of rules governing such weapons.

But activists warned that time was running out and that the glacial pace of the UN-brokered discussions was not responding to an arms race already underway.

"Ladies and gentlemen, I have news for you: the robots are not taking over the world. Humans are still in charge," said India's disarmament ambassador, Amandeep Gill, who chaired the CCW meeting.

"I think we have to be careful in not emotionalising or dramatising this issue," he told reporters in response to criticism about the speed of the conference's work.

Twenty-two countries, mostly those with smaller military budgets and lesser technical know-how, have called for an outright ban, arguing that automated weapons are by definition illegal as every individual decision to launch a strike must be made by a human.

Gill underscored that a banning killer robots, or even agreement on rules, remained a distant prospect.

He said nations are likely to meet on the issue again for two weeks next year for further discussions focused on how autonomous weapons work and how their use should be controlled.

"I am very happy with the start we made", he said. "It would be unwise

for us to rush into (anything) at this stage."

No time to waste

Campaign groups agreed that there had been some progress at the inaugural meeting but sounded an alarm over further foot-dragging.

"Countries do not have time... to waste just talking about this subject," Mary Wareham of the arms division at Human Rights Watch told AFP.

She said that "militaries around the world and defence companies are sinking a lot of money" into weapons that select and destroy targets without human control.

The Campaign to Stop Killer Robots pressure group, which Wareham coordinates, highlighted two key points of agreement that emerged during the UN meeting.

Most nations now agree on the need for a new "legally-binding instrument" controlling the use of killer robots and most "states now accept that some form of human control must be maintained over weapons systems", a campaign statement said.

'Weapons of mass destruction'

The question now is deciding "what effective human control means in practice", the head of the Arms Unit at the International Committee of the Red Cross, Kathleen Lawand, told AFP in an email.

The ICRC has not called for a ban, but Lawand warned that action on setting limits was "urgently needed" as the technology was moving fast.

Academics attending the talks in Geneva urged the UN to act before it was too late.

The "arms race has happened (and) is happening today" said Toby Walsh, an expert on artificial intelligence at the University of New South Wales in Australia.

"These will be weapons of mass destruction", he added during a side-event at the UN this week.

"I am actually quite confident that we will ban these weapons... My only concern is whether (nations) have the courage of conviction to do it now, or whether we will have to wait for people to die first."

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