



Power of humanity

Council of Delegates of the International Red Cross
and Red Crescent Movement

19-23 June 2022, Geneva

SUMMARY REPORT ON WORKSHOP

Towards a Movement position on autonomous weapon systems

Date and time: Thursday, 3 February 2022 09:00–10:30 (CET): English, Arabic, Russian 17:00–18:30 (CET): English, French, Spanish

Co-Chairs: Ivar Stokkerei, Head of Unit for Humanitarian Values and International Law, Norwegian Red Cross; Maya Brehm, Legal Adviser, Arms and Conduct of Hostilities Unit, ICRC.

Rapporteur: Neil Davison, Senior Scientific and Policy Adviser, Arms and Conduct of Hostilities Unit, ICRC.

Panellists: Frank Sauer, Senior Research Fellow, Bundeswehr University Munich; Cordula Droege, Chief Legal Officer and Head of the Legal Division, ICRC; Pamela A. Moraga, Coordinator for Disarmament, Non-Proliferation and International Security Affairs, Permanent Mission of Chile to the United Nations in Geneva.

Executive summary

This workshop reviewed progress made since the Movement first called upon states to “fully consider the potential humanitarian impact of [...] autonomous weapon systems” (Resolution 7, 2013 Council of Delegates)¹, and provided an opportunity to consider the development of a Movement position. Panellists outlined: the grave risks that autonomous weapons pose to civilians, legal and ethical norms, and international security; the ICRC’s recommendations to states on how to address these risks; and the state of multilateral efforts to agree international limits. Ensuing discussions highlighted the experiences of National Societies in mobilizing governments and others, illustrated the benefits of collective Movement action, and demonstrated considerable support for a Movement position.

General observations and key highlights

The workshop examined the progress made over the past decade by states, civil society and the Movement on addressing the concerns raised by autonomous weapons. In May 2021, the ICRC’s president presented states with recommendations for new legally binding rules to prohibit unacceptable autonomous weapons and place strict limits on all others.² These proposals have received significant support among many states and international experts. Presentations by panellists indicated that

¹ Council of Delegates, Resolution 7, “Weapons and international humanitarian law” (CD/13/R7), 2013:

<https://shop.icrc.org/resolutions-of-the-2013-council-of-delegates-pdf-en>

² ICRC Position on Autonomous Weapon Systems: Position and Background Paper, 12 May 2021: <https://shop.icrc.org/icrc-position-on-autonomous-weapon-systems-pdf-en>

momentum is building towards the adoption of new rules. Discussions confirmed that there is a unique opportunity for the Movement to shape an effective international response. National Societies shared their experiences in mobilizing governments and other actors, and many expressed their support for the development of a Movement position, underlining the benefits of collective Movement action in generating an effective international response to urgent humanitarian, legal and ethical concerns, and bringing Resolution 7 up to date with political realities and trends in the development of autonomous weapons.

Key points raised

In **Part 1** of the workshop panellists explained that autonomous weapons, which select and apply force to targets without human intervention, raise serious humanitarian concerns due to the difficulties in anticipating and limiting their effects. This brings risks of harm to civilians and to combatants *hors de combat* and raises significant challenges for compliance with international humanitarian law. It was also noted that autonomous weapons may offer the military advantage of increased operational speed which brings risks of unintended escalation, occurring too quickly for humans to intervene. Autonomous weapons employing AI and machine learning exacerbate humanitarian and international security concerns. Machine learning systems, such as image recognition algorithms, are “brittle” and can fail in unpredictable ways in real-world situations. They are also vulnerable to manipulation by opponents’ countermeasures. More fundamentally, autonomous weapons raise ethical and moral concerns for society, and for humanity, because they would effectively replace human decisions about the life and death of fellow human beings with sensors, software and machine processes.

In May 2021, the ICRC issued a position paper recommending that all states adopt new legally binding rules on autonomous weapon systems in order to support multilateral efforts, including within the Convention on Certain Conventional Weapons (CCW). The ICRC recommends prohibiting unpredictable autonomous weapon systems and autonomous weapon systems that are designed or used to apply force against persons. In addition, the design and use of other autonomous weapons should be subject to limits on targets, duration, geographic scope, scale, and situations of use, and to requirements for human-machine interaction. Panellists noted that the ICRC’s recommendations are considered principled and pragmatic, and have garnered significant support among many states, civil society, the scientific community and the public.

Panellists described the progress in multilateral discussions, which began in the Human Rights Council and have continued since 2013 at the CCW. While some states believe existing international humanitarian law is sufficient, the majority of states – together with the ICRC and many others, including thousands of AI professionals – see the need for new legally binding rules. There is growing support for a two-tiered approach that prohibits unacceptable autonomous weapons and establishes limits on all others. A panellist explained that opposition by a few states engaged in autonomous weapon development has thus far prevented the CCW moving concretely towards the negotiation of new rules, calling into question whether the CCW can fulfil its role in addressing humanitarian concerns. There is growing momentum among the majority of states to take action, and alternative avenues are available, as illustrated by the successful adoption of treaties prohibiting anti-personnel mines, cluster munitions and nuclear weapons. One National Society asked whether national and non-binding approaches should also be considered given that some states developing autonomous weapons may not participate in negotiations. Panellists stressed that, while common policy standards and good practice guidance can complement new international rules, they cannot be a substitute for them, and that, while it is important to involve all states in normative development, experience shows that international humanitarian law treaties with widespread adherence can also influence the policies and practices of states that do not become party to them at the outset.

Part 2 of the workshop enabled the exchange of experiences from National Societies on how to effectively engage governments, militaries, scientists, the private sector, and the public, and provided an opportunity to consider the benefits of a Movement position. National Societies stressed the importance of sustained dialogue to deepen mutual understanding and create opportunities for influence. In addition to regular

exchanges with foreign and defence ministries, National Societies have organized public and closed-door roundtables, colloquiums and training sessions; participated in government working groups and consultations; and conducted public outreach with a focus on young people. National Societies are increasingly called upon to participate in policy and legal debates on autonomous weapons, including in parliamentary hearings. The ICRC's recommendations were said to have provided a strong basis for detailed conversations with governments. One National Society said their dialogue with the government would not have been possible without the ICRC position. Other National Societies expressed their appreciation for the opportunity to learn from these experiences, highlighting the importance of pooling resources and efforts as National Societies are increasingly solicited for their views and many have limited resources available.

Discussions included comments on the value of collective Movement action and demonstrated support for a Movement position on autonomous weapons. A number of National Societies stressed that a Movement position would raise the profile of humanitarian concerns, highlight the urgency for action, lend credibility to advocacy efforts, and ultimately facilitate political action by states. It was also emphasized that a clear position would enable the Movement to keep pace with current political and technical developments, and help National Societies stay relevant in their outreach by bringing Resolution 7 up to date.

Conclusions and recommendations

The workshop demonstrated that there is widespread interest in the challenges of autonomous weapons from National Societies in all geographic regions, and that National Societies have carried out an impressive array of activities in recent years. Discussions suggested that there would be broad support for collective Movement action based on a common Movement position and that this objective should be further explored. The ICRC's expertise and recommendations were seen as instrumental in building momentum among states, and the entire Movement now has an opportunity to shape an international response that effectively addresses the humanitarian, legal and ethical concerns about autonomous weapons. It is important that the Movement seizes this opportunity before further development and deployment of these weapons makes the adoption of new rules yet more challenging.