Meeting of the High Contracting Parties to the CCW
Side Event coordinated by the Campaign to Ban Killer Robots
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Introduction

Thank you very much for your presence here today. Special thanks go to my colleague Miriam Struyk for their invitation on behalf of the Campaign.

I am here representing Pax Christi International, a faith-based peace network of over 100 member organizations in over 50 countries. In collaboration with our Dutch colleagues from PAX – one of the co-founders of the Campaign to Ban Killer Robots – we have been approaching religious leaders and faith-based organizations on this sensitive issue of lethal autonomous weapons. In the next few minutes I want to share with you about this initiative and its meaning within the campaign.

The Interfaith Declaration

The Interfaith Declaration is a statement from religious leaders, faith groups and faith-based organizations, in which they raise their collective voice to call on all governments to participate in the international debate and to work towards a ban on the development, production and use of fully autonomous weapons. At the same time the Declaration is becoming a commitment of endorsing leaders to educate their own constituencies around this sensitive issue.

The Declaration has been signed so far by more than 70 faith leaders of various religious denominations from over 30 countries. Among representatives from Christian communities we have Archbishop Desmond Tutu, Nobel Peace laureate; the Latin Patriarch of Jerusalem, His Beatitude Fouad Twal; and the Chaldean Patriarch of Iraq, His Beatitude Louis Raphael Sako. We have several archbishops and bishops, and we also have superiors of religious orders who represent large numbers of active communities around the world. The Declaration has also been signed by faith leaders from Muslim, Buddhist and Jewish communities. This is an ongoing initiative and the number of signatories keeps growing. After similar statements from Nobel laureates and scientists, the responses to this initiative show how ethical concerns over killer robots are widely shared within society.

For religious leaders the ethical concerns arise from core values and principles of their faith traditions regarding human life. For Christians, human life is sacred and the dignity of the human person is the foundation of a moral vision for society. Devotion to being harmless is a core principle of Buddhist religious life and the principle of non-harming is absolute in regard to killing. Islam considers all life forms as sacred; however, the sanctity of human life is accorded a special place.

The ethical questions

If killing a human being is already disturbing and problematic when it is done by another human being, how is it going to be if it comes from a machine? This is a key question and it

has already been posed many times: Is it morally acceptable to delegate decisions about the use of lethal force to autonomous systems? Are we really willing to allow decisions on death and life from computerized systems? There are several ongoing discussions questioning the capacity of robotic systems to acquire moral reasoning and, as a consequence, their capacity to respond to moral dilemmas.

Even if technologies keep advancing in several fields it is highly questionable that machines can be programmed to match human judgment. And this is a fundamental aspect concerning the way our human rights law, our international law and our international humanitarian law systems are built. Indeed, how can autonomous weapons systems be subject to the rules and moral principles central to those juridical instruments? We simply cannot get rid of sound and clear accountability mechanisms and these will be significantly challenged by the foreseeable use of those lethal systems.

Human dignity is also at stake here. Killer robots are another step in what many see as a dehumanizing trend in warfare. Killing from the distance, killing using software programmed to kill, engaging targets as mere objects; all that is presented as a normal evolution in the technologization of war, which sometimes resembles – and is becoming familiar through, the gamification of violence and war. The message and the engagement of religious leaders and faith-based institutions remind us that the value and dignity of human life should be fully respected.

I am sure that most of us here feel the sense of urgency around this issue. Technology advances very rapidly, more than legal and regulatory systems that are usually based on social consensus. And these regulatory systems are not always able to fill in the gaps quickly. We can avoid that Killer robots become part of such gaps and we probably should.

Core ethical questions can also be asked concerning other fields connected with the development of fully autonomous weapons such as economics and technology. Are we, as a society, willing to subordinate the value of human life and our ethical standards to the search for economic profits or to the pursuit of ever more advanced technological developments?

Ideally, we should all be working to avoid war, and nations should be focusing on protecting the right to life by finding increasingly effective ways to prevent conflicts and resolve them by peaceful means. However, the development of killer robots is disturbing because it may seem that we feel comfortable with increasingly sophisticated forms of killing human beings. If the ethical standards of societies have to be measured on the way they threaten or enhance the life and dignity of the human person, this is not going in the right direction.

This is by no means a simple issue and no simple answers are expected. But the message of religious leaders underlines the need of urgent actions within ethical frameworks shared by millions of people in our planet. We can promote further dialogue to approach the more complex aspects of this issue and we can also promote policies aimed to pave the way for a pre-emptive ban on killer robots.

It is important to acknowledge that ethical aspects in this process are not limited to the questions regarding the autonomous weapons themselves. Taking action or failing to take action around the development, production and use of LAWS has also ethical implications. A number of religious leaders, civil society organizations and states are already taking action, but we hope many many more will do the same.