

The Rt Hon Ben Wallace MP
Secretary of State for Defence
Ministry of Defence
London, SW1A 2HB

Cc: **The Rt Hon Elizabeth Truss MP**, Secretary of State for Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Affairs
Cc: **Simon Manley CMG**, Ambassador and Permanent Representative, UK Mission to the UN (Geneva)

3 December 2021

Dear Secretary of State,

We are writing to you on behalf of the UK Campaign to Stop Killer Robots¹ to urge you to support strong action on the global stage to address lethal autonomous weapons systems. Specifically, we call on the UK to support a legally-binding instrument that prohibits the development of weapons systems capable of targeting humans autonomously, and ensures meaningful human control over the use of force through prohibitions and positive obligations that safeguard effective control of all weapons systems.

As societies across the world grapple with the phenomenal pace of technological change and the potential for AI to shape almost every sector of human endeavour, we believe some tasks should never be outsourced to a machine. One such area of profound moral importance relates to the decision by militaries or law enforcement agencies, to take a human life.

There is a clear moral red line in reducing people to objects to be sensed and killed or injured by machines. It is an affront to dignity, a fundamental digital dehumanisation. Using systems autonomously to target people would also pose legal challenges and severe dangers to civilians, as it would not be possible or applicable to be able to ensure that such systems could comply with the principle of distinction. Previous disarmament treaties have shown that effective regulation can prevent widespread proliferation and be successful in reducing risks to military personnel as well as civilians.

Globally, momentum is building for the creation of a new legally-binding instrument to address lethal autonomous weapons systems. The UN Secretary-General, the International Committee for the Red Cross and an ever-growing list of states - currently numbering 69 - have called for this.

In the UK, our campaign is working with different constituencies to build awareness on this issue and outline areas of concern:

- **In universities**, a huge body of research is being funded by the MOD, in some cases in partnership with arms manufacturers, which is highly relevant to the production of technology that could be incorporated into lethal weapons systems (even if it is not explicitly identified/intended as such). A lack of transparency and weak ethical standards under which such research proceeds is enabling a concerning permissive environment for the development of technology with potentially harmful applications. There should be full transparency in relation to publicly funded research, the risks associated with the technologies under development and an explicit commitment from the UK Government that the products of such research will never be incorporated into a lethal autonomous weapons system.
- **In parliament**, interest is growing among political parties and also individual parliamentarians, including through the call made from the floor of the House of Commons in December 2020 by Alyn Smith MP for the UK to support a prohibition on these weapons, and a similar call in the House of Lords in November 2021 by Lord Clement-Jones. From the Government's responses, we are alarmed that the UK appears to have weakened its position, from one of "the UK does not possess fully autonomous weapons systems and has no intention of developing them" to a highly caveated commitment that armed forces will retain "context-specific human involvement" when deploying lethal force. We call on the UK to urgently explain its new position and to clarify whether a human will always be in the loop when a decision to apply lethal force is taken.

- **In the tech sector**, we consistently hear from workers that action is required to protect their research outputs from weaponisation. Prominent global tech leaders including Mustafa Suleyman (Co-Founder, DeepMind) Elon Musk, (Founder, SpaceX) and Jeffrey Dean (Lead of Google Research and Machine Intelligence) as well as a host of companies with a major UK footprint are calling for governments to “create a future with strong international norms, regulations and laws against lethal autonomous weapons”. [Our research shows](#) there are unresolvable issues from the very technical spine outwards and outlines how command and control can become reliant upon flawed data gathering processes and fundamental [unpredictabilities](#) which cannot be reconciled with relevant laws. The [research](#) explores such issues across the lifecycle of a weapon system.
- **In the finance sector**, just as with fossil fuels, tobacco and [nuclear weapons](#), even without new international law in place, we are witnessing the financial repercussions of popular concern around autonomous weapons systems as well as potential legislative repercussions. Major [German](#) banks and rating agencies are already looking at this issue. In Norway, a government-appointed committee has recommended that the Norwegian Sovereign Wealth Fund, worth \$1trillion, removes companies manufacturing lethal autonomous weapons technology from its portfolio. Given that technology itself has an important role to play in regulating this sector, alongside legislative and approaches, the UK should look to its leadership in the [Regulatory-Technology industry](#), which has significant commercial interests attached, for opportunities to develop technology capable of regulating the component technology for autonomous weapons systems.

The issue has been discussed by the UN for over eight years while technologies have been advancing rapidly; we are therefore greatly concerned that some still feel it is premature to take meaningful action on this issue. We urge the UK to show leadership at the forthcoming CCW Review Conference to call for a new binding treaty to address lethal autonomous weapons and note that the proposal in the draft report of the 2021 Group of Governmental Experts (GGE) to establish a GGE to “negotiate and adopt by consensus an instrument on weapons systems based on emerging technologies in the area of autonomous weapons systems” offers an opportunity in this regard. Irrespective of the outcome of the Review Conference, the UK should work with others in the international community to pursue this aim.

We welcome the productive relationship that our campaign has with UK Government officials on this issue and acknowledge the significant overlaps in our objectives. We look forward to continuing this relationship and to working together to counter the stark dehumanisation of warfare.

Yours sincerely,

Chris Cole (Drone Wars)
 Ben Donaldson (UNA-UK)
 Oliver Feeley-Sprague (Amnesty International UK)
 Elizabeth Minor (Article 36)
 Taniel Yusef (WILPF-UK)

On behalf of the steering committee of the UK Campaign to Stop Killer Robots¹

1. The UK Campaign to Stop Killer Robots is a growing national coalition of NGOs, tech leaders and academics. UK NGO members include Article 36, Acronym Institute, Action on Armed Violence, Amnesty International UK, Campaign Against Arms Trade, Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament, Centre for Feminist Foreign Policy – UK, Centre for Peace, Security and Armed Violence Prevention, Drone Wars UK, International Observatory of Human Rights (IOHR), Scientists for Global Responsibility, United Nations Association-UK and War on Want. All members are working to preemptively ban fully autonomous weapons although may not take a position on or endorse each specific point addressed in this letter.