

Statement by Steve Goose, Human Rights Watch
to the Convention on Conventional Weapons Annual Meeting of States Parties
Geneva, Switzerland
November 14, 2013
General Exchange of Views

Thank you Mr. Chairman,

We are extremely encouraged with the prospect of a mandate to work on fully autonomous weapons in the Convention on Conventional Weapons (CCW), and we thank you Mr. Ambassador for your leadership and vision on this issue. We will return to fully autonomous weapons in a moment.

But there is another issue that demands the attention of CCW States Parties: that of incendiary weapons and the need to revisit Protocol III. Human Rights Watch has been urging States Parties for several years to agree to a mandate to discuss incendiary weapons and possible amendments to Protocol III. After more than 30 years, it has become evident that the protocol is not meeting its objectives and needs to be strengthened and universalized.

At this time last year, during the CCW annual meeting, when States Parties were deciding NOT to work on incendiary weapons, Syria carried out its first incendiary weapon attack, the first in a devastating series of attacks that have caused extensive and horrific harm to civilians.

Human Rights Watch has documented at least 56 incendiary weapons attacks by the Syrian air force since last November. Detailed investigations of just four of those attacks revealed that 41 civilians were killed and 71 wounded. A British emergency medicine doctor who treated victims told us, “One patient with 90 percent third degree burns arrived alive at the hospital. The clothes had been burned off him. It was the most horrific injury I have ever seen in a live patient. Only his eyes moved.”

We appreciate the many statements of concern we have heard today regarding Syrian use of incendiary weapons. Indeed, Syria’s widespread use of incendiary weapons should be condemned by all CCW States Parties. But Syria’s use should also be an impetus for States Parties to revisit Protocol III, to look at how well it has functioned, and to discuss how it could be improved to better protect civilians during armed conflict.

Such improvements could include applying the same prohibition to surface-delivered incendiary weapons as already exists for air-delivered incendiary weapons, and addressing the use of white

phosphorus as an incendiary weapon. The best solution would be a comprehensive prohibition on incendiary weapons.

CCW States Parties could carry out work on incendiary weapons at the same time that they begin work on fully autonomous weapons. The CCW has often dealt with two issues simultaneously in the past.

Mr. Chairman, turning to another issue, as a founding member of the International Network on Explosive Weapons, Human Rights Watch joins the UN Secretary-General, UNMAS, the International Committee of the Red Cross, and others in calling on governments to address the issue of the use of explosive weapons in populated areas in a more extensive and focused manner, most notably through a halt to the use of explosive weapons with wide area effect in populated areas.

Turning to the issue of fully autonomous weapons, we will not take the time now to elaborate the many reasons why work on fully autonomous weapons is crucial, and why we believe that a comprehensive prohibition is needed. But most fundamentally, we believe that robotic weapons systems should not be making life and death decisions on the battlefield. That would be inherently wrong, morally and ethically. There should always be meaningful human control over targeting and kill decisions.

We also believe that fully autonomous weapons are likely to run afoul of international humanitarian law, and that there are technical, proliferation, societal, and other concerns that make a ban necessary. Human Rights Watch has distributed a memorandum to CCW delegates on this matter.

Mr. Chairman, work on fully autonomous weapons could revitalize the CCW, and demonstrate that CCW States Parties can be forward-looking and not just reactive to disasters. But much more important than reinvigorating the CCW, a future Protocol VI prohibiting fully autonomous weapons would be the most important achievement in the life of the CCW.

It would have tremendously positive humanitarian impact, and best of all, it would be PREVENTIVE humanitarian impact. It would avoid potentially widespread harm to civilians and soldiers alike – in this case, harm inflicted by emotionless, compassionless machines operating outside of human control.

So we urge you to agree to the mandate, and in particular a mandate for five days of work, not three. Surely five days is the minimum needed given the complicated nature of this issue, the many questions States Parties have, and the fact it is the first time it will be discussed in the CCW.

We urge you to prepare for extensive and intensive work next year, both within the CCW and outside the CCW context. We urge you to develop national policies, and to respond to the UN

Special Rapporteur on Extrajudicial Executions' call for national moratoria on fully autonomous weapons. We urge you to come back one year from now and agree to a new mandate to being negotiations. We implore you to act with a sense of urgency and to heed the humanitarian call.

I will now give the microphone to my Human Rights Watch colleague, Mary Wareham, who serves as the coordinator of the global NGO coalition, the Campaign to Stop Killer Robots, to speak on behalf of the Campaign.