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Dear Maiara Folly

Thank you for your letter to the Secretary of State for Defence dated 20 November concerning the international discussions on Lethal Autonomous Weapons Systems (LAWS). We have been asked by the Secretary of State for Defence to respond on his behalf.

I would like to take this opportunity to re-assure you that there has been no change in UK policy towards fully autonomous weapon systems. The operation of our weapon systems will always be under human control and no UK weapons systems will be capable of attacking targets without this.

As you have pointed out, the UK believes that human-machine interaction should be a key focus for substantive discussions within the UN CCW Group of Government Experts (GGE) on LAWS and therefore I am pleased to note that you welcomed the UK's working paper exploring 'the human role in autonomous warfare'. We believe discussions on this are central to the continued success of the group, and we look forward to continuing to contribute to international debate on the topic.

We believe that it is also crucial that work assesses the interaction between humans and machines across the lifecycle of a weapon system – from development right through to end use. This should be supplemented by the exchange of good practice, mapped against this lifecycle, so the group can provide a clear framework for the operationalisation of its guiding principles. The UK looks forward to further progression on this subject within the GGE.

It is our view that we should embrace and welcome technological advancements that can support compliance with International Humanitarian Law, as in doing so we can offer greater protection to persons who are not, or who are no longer, participating in hostilities. A legally binding instrument which hampers the legitimate development and use of such technologies would be counterproductive.

The GGE remains the right forum in which to progress work on LAWS and the UK looks forward to building on the positive efforts that we have seen in 2020 including the valuable interaction with civil society groups. It is hoped that we can overcome the obstacles that we face as a result of the current COVID-19 crisis and continue progress. The UK will be encouraging all High Contracting Parties to the CCW to be present at, and participate in, discussions in the coming months.

Thank you for your continued engagement and interest in this area.

Yours sincerely,
Counter Proliferation and Arms Control Centre