



**KEYNOTE ADDRESS BY HIS EXCELLENCY
BRIGADIER GENERAL (RETIRED) DR.
JULIUS MAADA BIO PRESIDENT OF THE
REPUBLIC OF SIERRA LEONE ON THE
OCCASION OF THE ECOWAS REGIONAL
CONFERENCE ON THE PEACE AND
SECURITY ASPECT OF AUTONOMOUS
WEAPONS SYSTEMS: AN ECOWAS
PERSPECTIVE
- WEDNESDAY, 17TH APRIL 2024**

Your Excellencies,
Ministers and Deputy-Ministers of Governments,
Members of the Diplomatic and Consular Corp,
Representatives of Non-State Actors,
Distinguished Ladies and Gentlemen,

Good morning!

1. I am delighted to welcome you to our historic city, Freetown, for the first African regional gathering on Autonomous Weapons Systems, with the theme: "Peace and Security Aspect of Autonomous Weapons System: an ECOWAS Perspective on a Path towards the Negotiation Process of a Legally Binding Instrument".

2. On behalf of the Government and great people of Sierra Leone, I warmly welcome you to this important Conference, which aims to primarily set the agenda and propel the global discourse on establishing a legally binding instrument to address the use of Autonomous Weapons.

3. Sierra Leone is particularly delighted to host esteemed representatives from the ECOWAS region and beyond to discuss and develop a common approach towards this complex but extremely relevant and important challenge.

4. This initiative comes in response to the UN Secretary-General's policy brief from July 2023, urging negotiations on this matter to be concluded by 2026.

5. Sierra Leone, having played a pivotal role in drafting UN General Assembly Resolution 78/241 on Autonomous Weapons, which was adopted in December 2023, is committed to urgently addressing challenges and concerns related to Artificial Intelligence (AI) and autonomy in weapons systems.

6. This Conference underscores Sierra Leone's active engagement in international forums and commitment to upholding agreements such as the Arms Trade Treaty.

7. The Conference aligns with Sierra Leone's current role as an elected member in the Non-Permanent Category of the UN Security Council, providing a platform for our country to advocate for a rules-based world order to enhance global security.

EXCELLENCIES, LADIES AND GENTLEMEN,

8. ECOWAS has been at the cutting edge of an integrated regional approach towards governance and security, and Autonomous Weapons Systems are emerging as one of the most fundamental challenges that we must confront as part of our collective responsibility to safeguard global peace, security, and human dignity.

9. Autonomous Weapons Systems represent a significant advancement in technology, offering capabilities that were once in the realm of science fiction. However, with this advancement comes a range of complex ethical, legal, and security challenges that demand our urgent attention.

10. As leaders in our respective nations, we must ensure that these technologies are developed and used in a manner that upholds the principles of international law, human rights, and humanitarian values.

11. We must not allow the allure of technological progress to blind us to the potential dangers posed by Autonomous Weapons Systems.

12. The deployment of these weapons has the potential to fundamentally alter the nature of warfare, raising serious

questions about accountability, oversight, and the protection of civilians.

13. The prospect of machines making life-and death decisions on the battlefield is deeply troubling and demands rigorous debate and careful consideration.

14. Furthermore, the proliferation of Autonomous Weapons could lead to an escalation of conflicts as nations race to develop and deploy ever more advanced systems. This arms race mentality threatens to destabilise regions and undermine global security.

15. As a nation that has experienced the devastating impact of armed conflict, Sierra Leone understands the importance of fostering meaningful dialogue and cooperation to prevent the outbreak of violence.

16. We have worked tirelessly to rebuild our country in the aftermath of conflict, and we are committed to ensuring that future generations do not have to endure the horrors of war.

EXCELLENCIES, LADIES AND GENTLEMEN,

17. Our concern is not advanced technology and innovation. In fact, in Sierra Leone, through strategic investments in human capital development and the establishment of the Directorate of Science, Technology, and Innovation (DSTI), we are laying the foundation for inclusive growth and prosperity, guided by principles of ethical governance and equitable access to technology.

18. As a nation, we are committed to promoting a culture of responsible innovation rooted in transparency, accountability, and inclusivity.

19. We recognise the importance of engaging with stakeholders from government, civil society, academia, and industry to promote and reward innovation while safeguarding human dignity.

20. That is why events such as this Conference are so critical. By bringing together experts, policymakers, and stakeholders from across the region, we can forge common understanding and develop strategies to address the challenges posed by Autonomous Weapons Systems.

21. Over the centuries, the world has developed ethical and legal benchmarks against which accountability for war is determined.

22. Our national and international governance structures should adapt to the pace of technological change, particularly the development and application of AI technologies to weapons systems so that legal and ethical norms developed over the centuries are not disrupted.

23. If that happens, it will lead to far-reaching consequences for the human security and stability of the ECOWAS region. The ease of replication and transfer associated with Autonomous Weapons Systems is alarming.

24. Their unchecked proliferation within the ECOWAS region would pose significant threats to stability and security, especially as they could be acquired and used by non state actors, including insurgents, terrorists, and criminals, to destabilise legitimate governments and already fragile societies.

EXCELLENCIES, LADIES AND GENTLEMEN,

25. The urgency for action cannot be overstated. In this context, Sierra Leone, along with like minded nations, welcomes the growing global call to finalise negotiations on a legally binding

instruments, as emphasised in the UN Secretary-General's policy brief on "A New Agenda for Peace".

26. The recent overwhelming support for the resolution on Autonomous Weapons Systems at the United Nations General Assembly, which we co-sponsored as a country, underscores the growing consensus to address this pressing issue.

27. This resolution mandates the UN Secretary General to seek the views of all states and stakeholders on addressing the legal, ethical, humanitarian, and security risks of Autonomous Weapons Systems.

28. This is one of the reasons why Sierra Leone has convened this Regional Meeting. We hope to amplify ECOWAS' voice and shape a regional approach towards this.

29. We have been deeply encouraged by the active engagement of the regional blocs of Latin American countries, led by Costa Rica and Caribbean states, in seeking a common approach to this issue.

30. This Conference has been convened so that ECOWAS Member States can critically assess and analyse the implications of this new military technology for our region, with the view to forging a regional position to realise the call by the United Nations and other global humanitarian organisations like the International Committee of the Red cross.

31. Our region cannot afford to overlook the potential challenges that the unchecked proliferation of Autonomous Weapons Systems will pose to everyone.

EXCELLENCIES, LADIES AND GENTLEMEN,

32. Let us ensure that our deliberations here are informed by the profound stakes involved and by our collective responsibility to

influence the development of norms that address emerging challenges while harnessing the potential for positive change.

33. We must always strive to proactively engage in shaping global norms and not be mere recipients, targets or beneficiaries of them.

34. This will greatly enrich the rules-based international order, which seems to be facing threats everywhere. That is why our discussions here must be candid and fruitful, and we must agree on a common approach to this challenge.

35. In these two days, let us engage in open, frank, and constructive discussions, embracing the diverse perspectives and voices that characterise our ECOWAS family. In our great diversity, every voice holds equal weight in shaping our collective future.

36. Let me conclude by acknowledging the efforts of our Permanent Mission in Geneva, which spearheaded the efforts towards this Conference with the full support of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and International Cooperation.

37. I would also like to commend the role of our Civil Society partner, the Centre for Accountability and Rule of Law, for their invaluable contribution.

38. After your deliberations, I invite you all to explore and experience the historic city of Freetown and its very friendly and hospitable people.

39. I thank you all for your presence, and I wish you fruitful discussions.

40. Enjoy your stay in Freetown!