ZISMUN

Zurich International School MUN

Dear Delegates,

We are honored to welcome you to the Human Rights Committee at ZISMUN 2025. We look forward to a meaningful dialogue with you as we respond to two critical agenda items: Civilian Harm in Autonomous Weapons Systems and Protecting Children's Rights in Armed Conflict. These issues are central to modern human rights issues and should engage informed collaboration on our part.

As delegates, you speak for not only the countries that you represent but also for the core ideals of Model United Nations. We urge you to come to these debates open to hearing various points of view, aiming for consensus while also representing your national stance correctly.

We encourage critical thinking, creativity, and constructive diplomacy and look forward to seeing well-researched and realistic proposals emerge. Recognizing the sensitive nature of these topics, we expect a high level of professionalism and decorum throughout the conference.

In preparing for the committee, we strongly encourage delegates to ground their arguments in international law, existing United Nations frameworks, and real world case studies. A strong understanding of past resolutions, current state practices, and the humanitarian implications of policy choices will be essential to productive debate. By engaging thoughtfully and respectfully, you will help foster solutions that are not only ambitious but also practical and impactful.

Best of Luck!

Your Chairs,
Will and Lara

Civilian harm from autonomous weapons systems

General Overview of the Situation:

The rapid advancement of artificial intelligence and robotics in the 21st century has transformed modern warfare and how it's conducted by all parties involved, from rogue Middle Eastern terrorist cells to modern-day superpowers. One of the most controversial developments in this regard is Autonomous Weapons Systems (AWS), which are weapons capable of selecting and engaging targets autonomously and without human intervention. While proponents argue that these systems can improve efficiency by lowering costs and reduce risks to soldiers by negating human error, such use raises serious legal and humanitarian concerns, particularly when it comes to the issue of civilian harm.

Civilian harm caused by autonomous weapons represents a growing global security and human rights challenge. Automated weapons systems sometimes struggle to be able to differentiate between combatants and civilians, especially in complex environments such as urban warfare or where combatants are intermingling with civilians. Errors, biases in algorithms, system malfunctions, and the lack of human judgment can result in unintended civilian casualties and destruction of civilian infrastructure. Beyond immediate physical harm, the deployment of AWS also poses long-term psychological problems for the civilian population, undermining international humanitarian law and global stability in general as automated weapons systems lower the risk for states or organizations to launch attacks. Without human oversight, it is easy for automated systems to accidentally target civilians, malfunction and target legally protected infrastructure, or simply operate without laws and regulations, as no human is technically "guilty" of war crimes committed by AI. This is often used by rogue states as plausible deniability for war crimes, which is called an "accountability gap."

Key Definitions:

Autonomous Weapons Systems (AWS):
Autonomous Weapons Systems are military tools that can select and engage targets without meaningful human control once activated. They rely on algorithms, sensors, and artificial intelligence to make decisions traditionally made by humans and operate autonomously without any human oversight

Civilian Harm:
Civilian harm refers to death, injury, psychological trauma, displacement, damage to civilian infrastructure, or any other negative effects resulting from military operations. This includes

both direct and indirect consequences of the use of weapons or any effects of military operations being conducted in an area with civilians.

Meaningful Human Control:
Meaningful human control is the concept that humans must be involved in military decisions when any potential fatal operations are conducted, meaning that all military operations should be reviewed by humans to determine that no mistakes have been made.

International Humanitarian Law (IHL):
International humanitarian law is the body of international law that governs armed conflict; this includes treaties such as the Geneva Convention or Rome Statute. It covers war crimes and aims to protect civilians from the effects of war and combatants from especially heinous and cruel methods of warfare.

Accountability Gap:
The accountability gap refers to the difficulty of assigning legal responsibility for unlawful harm caused by autonomous systems, because no single person is guilty for a single strike operated by a machine. This makes it very difficult to bring perpetrators of war crimes to justice, as they didn't conduct the strikes themselves but rather let a computer operate and authorize them.

Historical Situation:

Technology in warfare has changed and evolved throughout history, from spears to mechanical guns to drones you can operate from afar. If you look back, the seeds of autonomous weapons show up in Cold War-era defense tech—things like missile defense and automated radar. Even then, humans always had the final say and an overview of these weapons.

The big shift came in the 21st century: AI, machine learning, and better sensors let weapons sift through mountains of data in real time and act more on their own in ways much more efficiently than humans ever could. Early in the lifetime of fully automated weapons systems, you could see automated sentry guns and loitering munitions that could pick out targets without step-by-step input. This was much more efficient than humans ever could be and helped pave the way to the automated weapons systems that we see today, which include the likes of drones and ballistic missiles, all being operated without human control.

As AWS got tested and used, worries about civilians piled up. Drone strikes and automated targeting brought into focus how misidentification and collateral damage often happen. Civil society groups and humanitarian organizations started pushing for international rules, warning that truly autonomous weapons could lower the cost of going to war and put more civilians at risk.

That push sparked international conversations, especially under the Convention on Certain Conventional Weapons (CCW) (also known as the Inhuman Weapons Convention (IWC), where countries wrestled with weapons, ethical, legal, and security questions around automated weapons systems; however, these are only guiding principles rather than binding

international law. So far, though, there isn't a binding international treaty that specifically bans or regulates autonomous weapons, and they themselves are completely legal to use under international law.

Current Situation:

Civilian harm from autonomous weapons is a real and evolving concern. Fully autonomous weapons aren't at the forefront of modern conflict yet, but semi-autonomous systems are in use and technology is moving faster than ever. They're starting to show up in crowded areas, where telling civilians from combatants gets even trickier.

Big challenges include the fact that these weapons are unable to reliably read human behavior, intent, or even when someone is surrendering and legally protected. Bias in the algorithms—often a product of flawed or incomplete supervision of data—adds another incredibly complicated layer of risk. Following this, there are potential system failures, glitches, and unpredictable actions that can often put civilians in grave danger. And because military AI work is often classified and lacks reliable supervision, the administration of oversight and accountability becomes much harder.

The issue of an accountability gap also remains. When civilians get hurt by autonomous systems with no human guide, it's often unclear who's legally responsible, which makes finding culprits and bringing them to justice muddier and more complicated. Deploying automated weapons systems can hit vulnerable countries and regions the hardest, especially in war zones with weak governance and limited legal protections.

International efforts are mainly about norms like meaningful human control, better weapons review, and more transparency. But many sharp disagreements remain: some countries such as many South American and African nations push for strict rules or bans, while others such as Iran, Russia or the United States see automated weapons systems as essential for security and military edge and argue already existing international treaties and conventions determining war crimes suffice.

Key Treaties/Agreements:

Convention on Certain Conventional Weapons (CCW):
The CCW provides a framework for regulating weapons deemed to cause excessive injury or indiscriminate harm. Discussions on autonomous weapons take place within the CCW's Group of Governmental Experts (GGE), focusing on legal, ethical, and military aspects of AWS.

UN Guiding Principles on Business and Human Rights:
These principles are relevant in addressing the role of private companies in developing AI and weapons technologies and their responsibility to prevent human rights violations linked to AWS.

Geneva Conventions and Additional Protocols:
The Geneva Convention, first written in 1864 and its additional protocols form the foundation of international humanitarian law, including principles of distinction, proportionality, and military necessity, which are directly challenged by the use of autonomous weapons, as they make finding perpetrators of crimes much more difficult if no human was involved in the process of committing potential war crimes.

Key Country Positions:

United States:
The U.S. backs developing and using autonomous and semi-autonomous weapons, but it insists human judgment should still be part of any force use. It's against a blanket ban on automated weapons systems, arguing that current international law, if applied correctly, already covers the basics.

China:
China supports limits on fully autonomous lethal weapons but keeps pouring money into military AI research. It pushes for rules and oversight rather than a total ban, all while keeping strategic leeway.

Russia:
Russia is against hard, binding international limits on autonomous weapons, seeing them as key to future military power. It warns that overregulation could slow down tech progress and weaken national defense.

Germany:
Germany backs robust international rules on AWS and stresses that meaningful human control is essential. It has called for clearer legal standards to protect civilians and uphold international humanitarian law.

United Kingdom:
The United Kingdom maintains that its weapons systems will always involve human oversight. It supports continued discussion under the CCW but does not support a legally binding ban on autonomous weapons, as it argues that existing treaties and conventions go far enough to mitigate the risks of automated weapons systems.

Possible Solutions:

Transparency and Accountability:
To further prevent civilian harm from Autonomous Weapons Systems, states should promote greater transparency in the development and deployment of these systems. In addition, states should provide greater accountability to ensure timely and meaningful investigations into civilian harm from Autonomous Weapons Systems.

Ethically Aligned, Bias Free AI Research:
Lastly, investing in research aimed at developing, ethically aligned, and bias-free Artificial Intelligence systems may reduce the risk of making errors or causing unintended harm. Notwithstanding, the ethical safeguards must not supplant any of the legal obligations or human oversight.

Increasing Transparency and Accountability:
It is important for states to have increased transparency into how they are developing and deploying AWS. A clearer accountability system would provide a better means of ensuring that all civilian harm resulting from AWS is investigated and addressed appropriately.

Investing in Ethical AI Research:
Investing in research for AI systems that are ethical, bias-free and aligned with human values can help reduce errors and unintended harm. An important caveat is that ethical safeguards should not provide Mexico with a substitute for legal responsibility and human oversight.

Further Readings:

Autonomous Weapons Systems

Autonomous Weapon Systems and Human Control | Digital Society Initiative | UZH

What are Autonomous Weapon Systems? | The Belfer Center for Science and International Affairs

Works Cited

"Autonomous Weapon Systems, Errors and Breaches of International Humanitarian Law." *Journal of International Criminal Justice*, vol. 21, no. 5, 2023, pp. 1005–1027. Oxford Academic, https://academic.oup.com/jicj/article/21/5/1005/7325841.

Bhuta, Nehal, et al. "A Comparative Analysis of the Definitions of Autonomous Weapons Systems." *Science and Engineering Ethics*, vol. 28, no. 3, 2022. Springer, https://link.springer.com/article/10.1007/s11948-022-00392-3.

Roff, Heather M. "Minimum Levels of Human Intervention in Autonomous Attacks." *Journal of Conflict and Security Law*, vol. 27, no. 3, 2022, pp. 387–410. Oxford Academic, https://academic.oup.com/jcsl/article/27/3/387/6584441.

Stockholm International Peace Research Institute. *Retaining Human Responsibility in the Development and Use of Autonomous Weapon Systems*. SIPRI, 2022, https://www.sipri.org/publications/2022/policy-reports/retaining-human-responsibility-development-and-use-autonomous-weapon-systems-accountability.

International Committee of the Red Cross. *Autonomous Weapon Systems and International Humanitarian Law: Selected Issues*. ICRC, 2021, https://www.icrc.org/en/article/autonomous-weapon-systems-and-international-humanitarian-law-selected-issues.

Altmann, Jürgen, et al. "Technical Risks of (Lethal) Autonomous Weapon Systems." *arXiv*, 2024, https://arxiv.org/abs/2502.10174.

Human Rights Watch. *A Hazard to Human Rights: Autonomous Weapons Systems and Digital Decision-Making*. Human Rights Watch, 2025, https://www.hrw.org/report/2025/04/28/hazard-human-rights/autonomous-weapons-systems-and-digital-decision-making.

United Nations. *Convention on Certain Conventional Weapons: Group of Governmental Experts on Lethal Autonomous Weapons Systems*. United Nations Office for Disarmament Affairs, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Convention_on_Certain_Conventional_Weapons_%E2%80%93_Group_of_Governmental_Experts_on_Lethal_Autonomous_Weapons_Systems.

United States Department of Defense. *Directive 3000.09: Autonomy in Weapon Systems*. U.S. Department of Defense, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Department_of_Defense_Directive_3000.09.

International Committee of the Red Cross. "ICRC Calls on States toward Treaty Negotiations on Autonomous Weapons." *ICRC*, https://www.icrc.org/en/document/autonomous-weapons-icrc-calls-states-towards-treaty-negotiations.