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Secretary of State

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Thank you for your letter received on 8 April 2015, about the recent UN Convention on Conventional Weapons (CCW) Informal Meeting of Experts on Lethal Autonomous Weapons Systems (LAWS), held in Geneva from 10-14 April 2015.

I am pleased that you consider the UK has an important contribution to make to the international discussions on LAWS. Indeed, throughout our engagement on this subject we have attempted to play a constructive role, and to share our position on a number of different areas.

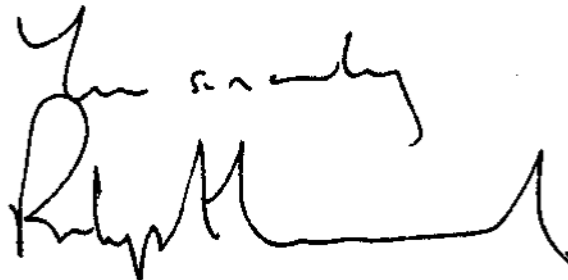
At those discussions we outlined in detail the targeting process undertaken by UK armed forces. This process is based upon human oversight and control being exercised at a number of different stages in the use of all weapons systems. Our view is that the ability of a fully autonomous weapon system to meet all of the requirements of the targeting process would require a level of programming and technical complexity beyond the capacity of current technology, and indeed beyond even that envisaged for the future. Having said that, the phrase 'meaningful human control' is not currently utilised in either our policy or doctrine, and we are not yet convinced of its value as a framing reference for discussion.

At the discussions, we instead emphasised the value of International Humanitarian Law (IHL) in providing a framework in which debate can take place on the basis of agreed principles. IHL is the appropriate legal framework for the assessment and use of all weapons systems in armed conflict.

It is the UK's position that it would provide an appropriate and sufficient framework for the assessment and regulation of LAWS should they ever be developed, not least through the process of legal weapons review. We shared some details of the UK's approach to legal weapons review and continue to encourage all states to adopt such a process, an initiative I hope you will support and encourage.

I have noted the points you make on the current format in which UK policy on LAWS is captured. As the national and international debate continues to develop, we will reflect on how best UK policy can be further developed and articulated.

The UK is not developing and has no plans to develop LAWS. Weapons systems will always remain under human control. The issue of LAWS is indeed an important one, and we are pleased that national dialogue such as this, and international dialogue through the CCW, is giving the matter the degree of attention it merits.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Philip Hammond', written in a cursive style.

THE RT HON PHILIP HAMMOND