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of Defence

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Thank you for your 13 May letter to the Prime Minister expressing concern over the development of fully autonomous weapons.

The Remotely Piloted Air System (RPAS) is an important means of giving our ground forces the vital information they need to stay one step ahead of an enemy. Whether for supporting troops on patrol or targeting insurgents, their ability to loiter over and survey areas for enemy activity and then feed back images and videos in real time means they are an invaluable asset to our commanders on the ground. RPAS have not been shown to present the risks to civilians suggested in some reports, on the internet and in other media.

UK REAPER is not an autonomous system and the use of any of the weapons depends upon commands from the flight crew. Whilst technological advances will likely increase the level of automation in some systems, just as in other non-military equipment, the MOD currently has no intention to develop systems that operate without human intervention in the weapon command and control chain.

As a matter of policy, the UK is committed to using remotely piloted rather than highly automated systems as an absolute guarantee of human oversight and authority for weapons release. In addition, the UK complies fully with its obligations under international law, including as set out in Article 36 of Additional Protocol 1 to the Geneva Conventions, to review all new weapons, means and methods of warfare. That process applies to unmanned capabilities as well as to manned weapon systems.

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