

To: Rt Hon Winston Peters, Minister for Disarmament and Arms Control
CC: Professor Juliet Gerrard (Chief Scientific Advisor to the Prime Minister)

RE: AN INTERNATIONAL BAN ON AUTONOMOUS WEAPON SYSTEMS

Dear Minister,

We, the undersigned, call on the New Zealand government to take a clear stand against weaponizing AI. Lethal autonomous weapons systems (LAWS) that remove *meaningful human control* from determining the legitimacy of targets and applying lethal force sit on the wrong side of a clear moral line.

Such weapons, if developed, will permit war to be fought with a merciless fury and blazing speed impossible for humans to survive. The appalling consequence is that machines—*not people*—will determine who lives and dies. We oppose such uses of AI.

In particular, as technical experts, we are skeptical of the argument made by the New Zealand delegation at the UN meetings discussing LAWS, that “meaningful human control could be ensured through a human *on* the loop applied through programming constraints governing target selection and engagement, and an ability to disengage the system if required”. Often, the pace of engagement prevents meaningful human control from being achieved by providing an “abort” button to a human. This is not just a matter of speed but also of supervision. Human factors research shows that humans struggle to monitor autonomous systems adequately over time. Adding programming constraints on target selection and engagement does not change this.

Therefore, we ask New Zealand to announce its support for a ban on LAWS at the upcoming UN meeting in late March and work to negotiate a treaty instrument that achieves this. New Zealand has a long and proud history of moral leadership in this area, as seen for instance in its strong position against nuclear weapons and its role in the Convention on Cluster Munitions (CCM). We hope the current New Zealand government can add to this proud legacy.

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Professor Stephen Cranefield (Department of Information Science, University of Otago)

Associate Professor Ali Knott (Department of Computer Science, University of Otago)

Associate Professor Ben Wooliscroft (Department of Marketing, University of Otago)

Professor Brendan McCane (Department of Computer Science, University of Otago)

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Dr Lincoln C. Wood (Department of Management, University of Otago)

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Associate Professor Mark Sagar (University of Auckland, and CEO Soul Machines)

Rhys Compton (student at Faculty of Computing and Mathematical Science, University of Waikato).

Dr Bob Durrant (Department of Mathematics and Statistics, University of Waikato)

Dr Steven Mills (Department of Computer Science, University of Otago)

Professor Eibe Frank (Department of Computer Science, University of Waikato)

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