

**Virtual address by Sir Ronald Sanders**  
**Ambassador of Antigua and Barbuda to the United States of America**  
**and the Organization of American States**  
**At CARICOM Conference 2023: “The Human Impacts of Autonomous Weapons”**  
**Organised by the Caribbean Community Implementation Agency for Crime and**  
**Security**  
**In Port-of-Spain, Trinidad and Tobago, 5<sup>th</sup> September 2023**

Thank you for the opportunity to speak with such a distinguished audience about Autonomous Weapons and the challenges they pose to the global community and the threats they present to our small Caribbean states.

You have just heard a description of autonomous weapons and the risks they pose to the security of a nation and the safety of individuals, if these weapons fall into the hands of criminal elements.

I underscore that they are weapon systems that can identify, target, and eliminate a person, a group of persons or an area without human intervention.

Unlike remotely piloted drones or other systems that require a human to make the final decision to engage a target, autonomous weapons can carry out these actions on their own once they are activated.

So, why should the Caribbean region be alarmed at this phenomenon?

There are several reasons:

Our communities are already under stress due to increasing crime and violence.

The violent crime and homicides to which illegal firearms now contribute, would escalate exponentially.

Can you imagine the impact of autonomous weapons being added to the arsenal of weapons that are now deployed in criminal activity?

Consider a drone, meticulously programmed with facial recognition technology, set to target an individual.

It scans, identifies, and eliminates its target all while operating undetected.

While drones capture significant attention, we must not forget that autonomous weapons are diverse - including covert city devices and lethal robots.

**Potential Targets:**

We must not delude ourselves into thinking that these weapons will solely be instruments of chaos.

They can be precise, targeting key figures such as political leaders, judges, law enforcement officers - or anyone who opposes those who benefit from drug trafficking, corruption or other criminal activity.

Beyond individuals, our critical infrastructure could also be at-risk including energy facilities that provide electricity to towns and cities, to ports, and to water supplies

### **Small State Vulnerabilities:**

Caribbean states would be extremely vulnerable.

Combating the influx of such technologically advanced weapons requires sophisticated infrastructure, training, and intelligence networks - assets that are scarce in small states.

Our inter-island connectivity, while being our strength, also accentuates our vulnerabilities.

Our borders are vast stretches of open sea, posing substantial challenges.

Policing these expanses for inter-island trafficking, especially for high-tech, compact autonomous weaponry, is a daunting task.

Moreover, our states would be burdened with increased costs.

For instance, law enforcement agencies would need to be revamped, counter-terrorism units established, and intelligence networks enhanced.

### **Regional Challenges and Global Context:**

The global landscape of this issue is complex, but mostly unhelpful.

There is an increasing chorus within the international community advocating for a robust treaty to govern these autonomous weapons.

Prominent international figures, including the Pope, and UN Secretary General Antonio Guterrez have voiced their concerns.

Also, the "Scientists' Call to Ban Autonomous Lethal Robots" serves as a stark reminder that knowledgeable persons are deeply concerned about the consequences of leaving decision-making in lethal situations to a machine.

For instance, last October in the First Committee of the 77<sup>th</sup> United Nation General Assembly, a joint statement was issued , drawing grave concerns about lethal autonomous weapons systems:

The statement said, among other things:

“... the introduction of new technological applications, such as those related to autonomy in weapon systems, also raise serious concerns from humanitarian, legal, security, technological and ethical perspectives. We therefore see an urgent need for the international community to further their understanding and address these risks and challenges by adopting appropriate rules and measures, such as principles, good practices, limitations and constraints”.<sup>1</sup>

Also, just a few weeks ago on July 20<sup>th</sup>, under the theme of “A new Agenda for Peace”, the Secretary-General recommended that all countries should “conclude, by 2026, a legally

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<sup>1</sup> Joint Statement on Lethal Autonomous Weapons Systems. First Committee, 77th United Nations General Assembly. Thematic Debate – Conventional Weapons, 21 October 2022.  
[https://estatements.unmeetings.org/estatements/11.0010/20221021/A1jJ8bNfWGIL/KLw9WYcSnnAm\\_en.pdf](https://estatements.unmeetings.org/estatements/11.0010/20221021/A1jJ8bNfWGIL/KLw9WYcSnnAm_en.pdf)

binding instrument to prohibit lethal autonomous weapon systems that function without human control or oversight.”<sup>2</sup>

I also reference Costa Rica's proactive efforts in galvanizing nations to address this issue, as was evident from the address today by Ambassador Maritza Chan Valverde.

The call for international cooperation is a crucial step.

But not all countries in the international community support prohibition or even strict rules governing the use of autonomous weapons.

Indeed, a few powerful governments, which are already extensively using drones in conflict areas and for targeting enemies, are resisting any binding treaties.

One of the sponsors of today's event, The Stop Killer Robots Movement has pointed out that at the final meeting of this year's discussions at the Group of Governmental Experts meeting on autonomous weapons systems, from 15-19th May 2023, ended without substantive progress.<sup>3</sup>

Big countries that see benefits in these weapons are resisting strict rules.

These nations are investing heavily in military applications of autonomous weapons, weaving them into the fabric of their defence strategies.

They argue that these weapons can reduce human casualties in conflict or be more precise in targeting.

But at what moral and societal cost?

And how long before these weapons find their way into the wrong hands, unchecked and unregulated?

While international negotiations grind slowly forward, the Caribbean cannot afford the luxury of waiting.

Our vulnerabilities are immediate and tangible.

### **Caribbean Unity:**

Our interconnected islands, while a source of strength and shared identity, present unique challenges in this context.

Our vast maritime borders are conduits for trafficking, and the introduction of autonomous weapons into this mix is a nightmare scenario.

Given the high stakes, Caribbean nations need not, and should not, wait for global consensus.

Our unity can be our strength.

A regional approach, where Caribbean nations come together to enact stringent legislation, can set a powerful precedent.

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<sup>2</sup> <https://news.un.org/en/story/2023/07/1138947>

<sup>3</sup> See: <https://www.stopkillerrobots.org/news/states-adopt-meaningless-report-after-civil-society-excluded-from-un-discussions-on-autonomous-weapons-systems/>

## **Proposed Regional Actions:**

Let me offer four ideas for collective regional action:

First, one of the immediate steps should be the introduction of laws strictly banning the importation of autonomous weapons.

By ensuring they don't enter our shores, we minimize the immediate threat.

Second, those found breaching these laws should face severe repercussions - from heavy fines to lengthy prison sentences.

The message should be clear: the Caribbean will not tolerate the proliferation of these weapons.

Third, beyond possession and trafficking, the actual use of such weapons should carry even more substantial penalties, potentially maximum terms.

This deterrence will underscore the gravity of the act.

And fourth, with the United Nations General Assembly returning in October 2023, Caribbean States have an opportunity to take leadership in pushing for meaningful progress towards a new legally binding instrument.

Every Caribbean leader at the General Assembly should include this call in their national statements.

Also, with the same vigour that small states at the UN fight against the existential threat of Climate Change, they should fight against the fatal threat of our police forces being overwhelmed by criminals armed with autonomous weapons.

## **Conclusion**

To conclude, the Caribbean region, with its unique vulnerabilities, stands at a crossroads.

Our States can be proactive, adapting our laws and bolstering our defences, or we can risk being overwhelmed.

I urge that we choose the path of foresight and action, ensuring that our region remains an area of safety, security and prosperity.

Our law enforcement and security forces will be in the forefront of contending with the devastating impact that autonomous weapons could have on Caribbean societies.

They cannot do that job without legislation, regulation and adjudication.

Therefore, our collective task is to encourage all our governments to act and act soon.

Thank you.