Tomorrow's Affairs
Analysis of today
Assessment of tomorrow

By: TA | AP Brief

UN members fail to agree on rules for the use of AI-powered killer robots



Efforts to set firm rules on AI-powered killer robots and drones ran aground Saturday as U.N.-backed talks in Geneva produced a softened agreement to extend discussions for two more years.

Scores of countries ended the week-long U.N. conference on weapons by agreeing to "elaborate" a possible accord on such lethal autonomous weapons systems by 2028.

But they didn't commit to binding rules sought by U.N. Secretary-General António Guterres, many countries, and activists.

The outcome underscored the difficulty of achieving concrete results in diplomacy amid global conflicts and major military powers jockeying for dominance.

Izumi Nakamitsu, the U.N. high representative for disarmament affairs, hailed a "significant achievement" but acknowledged a "glass half full or half empty" scenario, citing Guterres' hopes for a legally binding deal this year.

Activists accused military powers like Russia and the United States of blocking stronger language.

Stop Killer Robots lamented a "watered-down mandate," and Beatrice Fihn, founder of international law advocacy group Lex International, said the decision amounts to "pushing the can down the road for two more years."

They noted most countries supported work toward a new treaty, and Max Tegmark, a machine learning specialist at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology and founder of the Future of Life Institute, said: "States have agreed it is sufficient to just talk about the issue, for the 14th year, while these weapons enable atrocities."

Technology is moving faster than diplomacy

Before the meeting, seven countries proposed launching negotiations on a rulebook that could prevent or limit the ability of machines to kill without human control or accountability. That effort fell short.

"Technology is moving faster than diplomacy," said Ambassador Frederico Meyer of Brazil, which joined Austria, Belgium, Ireland, Mexico, New Zealand and Panama in proposing such negotiations. "Diplomats are very slow."

After years of talks on the issue, advocacy groups bemoaned obstructionism largely by Russia, which, like other top AI weapons-developing countries such as the United States, wants a freer hand to develop such high-tech weapons.

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Guterres, who leaves office at the end of the year, set a 2026 deadline for launching negotiations toward an agreement on autonomous weapons systems.

Pope Leo XIV and many advocacy and humanitarian groups have framed the issue as an existential debate, urging quick action to rein in AI weapons before they become too commonplace to regulate easily.

Activists say armed drones that can independently strike targets have already been deployed in some select instances in conflict zones, but widespread rollout hasn't happened.

Talks this week centered on the Convention on Certain Conventional Weapons, ratified by 128 countries, where decisions are made by consensus. That means any single country can thwart an agreement, and that any deal was likely to be based on a low common denominator.