

Remarks, Ypres Peace Prize

Dear Mayor and councilors of the city of Ypres,
Honoured guests,
Friends, colleagues, and those watching from afar,

It is with deep gratitude, respect, and humility that we join you tonight.

We are honoured to accept this award on behalf of the campaign to Stop Killer Robots.

To accept this award on behalf of the activists, campaigners, artists, researchers, scientists, students, engineers, and all others who share our goal of a future free from digital dehumanisation and automated killing.

This shared movement is part of a global effort to recognise the impact of the technology we create and our responsibility to ensure that it is used within limits and with accountability.

We stand in solidarity with all those around the world already living under the cloud of oppressive technologies. We honour those who have experienced conflict.

And here, in the City of Ypres, we speak to you remembering the human cost of the use of weapons of war.

We didn't expect a campaign to Stop Killer Robots to be needed in the world, but it is.

Technology and how we use it has always had a direct impact on people.

And around the world and throughout society, technologies are becoming more and more part of our everyday lives.

We often place hope in technology to rectify our perceived failings. We create technologies to solve our problems - to make us more precise, efficient, and help us to create new opportunities.

In many cases this can work. But technology isn't intrinsically good or bad. It is a tool created by people and used by people.

In our relationship with technology, with the role it plays in our lives, it is essential that we protect humanity, prioritise and enshrine the importance of human understanding, compassion, intellect and decision making.

We have reached a point where technologies are used to make important decisions about the opportunities open to us - from deciding whether someone is eligible for a bank loan, to determining the length of a prison sentence. Artificial intelligence, algorithms, machine learning - these technologies enable automated decision making, often without any human involvement.

These tools are frequently applied without consideration or care given to the data biases present in the tech, or the consequences of removing human understanding of context and nuance from decision-making.

At the most extreme end of the spectrum of automated decision making, is the automation of violence: of autonomous weapons, of killer robots.

We know we have a funny name.

When we say 'killer robots' for many it evokes scenes of a dystopian future. Far removed from the realities of our everyday lives.

For us, the reality of killer robots has never felt more present than when we are standing here, in Ypres, a site of so much loss, ripe with the knowledge of what it takes to rebuild.

The first large-scale use of chlorine gas in 1915; the first use of mustard gas on the battlefield of Passchendaele; artillery, machine guns, aerial photography - these 'innovations' in war brought death, pain, and enabled a distancing from the consequences of our violence.

We are, once again, on the precipice of an evolution in warfare.

Advances in technology now allow weapons systems to select and attack targets autonomously.

This means that in the use of force, we have less human control over what is happening and why.

It means we are closer to machines making decisions over who to kill or what to destroy. And for machines there is no difference between a 'who' and a 'what'.

This is what we mean by killer robots.

People wouldn't be seen by killer robots — they would be processed. Machines don't see us as people, just as another piece of code, numbers to be sorted.

Our humanity, our complex identities, should not be reduced to physical features or patterns of behaviour, to be analysed, pattern-matched and targeted by weapons systems unable to understand concepts of life, human rights, and dignity.

Technology isn't perfect, and autonomous weapons would be unpredictable and vulnerable to bias, hacking, and other failures. We also fear that they could be used to perpetrate violence and injustice upon vulnerable, persecuted, or marginalized groups - selecting their targets based on race, ethnicity, gender, faith or other identities.

We worry that with no regulation of these systems we could quickly see ourselves entering a destabilising international arms race. Replacing soldiers with machines could also make the decision to go to war easier and cheaper – and in doing so shift the burden of conflict even further onto civilians.

When it comes to digital dehumanisation – to weapons systems that will target people - we can act now to draw a moral line. We can prevent data biases inherent in most technologies from becoming further entrenched or prevalent in conflict, in border control, in policing and more.

We want to build a future that rejects systems that reduce living people to data points, to be automatically profiled, and subjected to force.

It is time to create legal and moral limits on the use of autonomy in weapons. |

Maya Angelou wrote: "What you're supposed to do when you don't like a thing is change it."

Stop Killer Robots is a coalition of more than 185 member organisations working across 67 countries to prevent this further automation of violence and ensure human control where it should be most present.

Our members campaign at the United Nations and in national capitals around the world, calling on governments to develop new international law on autonomy in weapons systems.

The Ypres Peace Prize is special for us because we were chosen by the youth of the city. We have had the chance to speak with many young people in their schools over this past week. They have strengthened our resolve and we leave Belgium more determined than ever that the young people of today should not have to live with the consequences of political inaction.

We believe that youth have a stake in stopping killer robots, and that their voices should be heard. We will use this Prize to build new opportunities for youth leadership within our movement.

We stand here hopeful for the future we can build, for the lessons that we can learn from our painful history. Peace takes continued work, diplomatic and political courage and international cooperation. It requires a willingness to stand against oppression and intolerance, and support justice, human rights, equity and respect for law.

We want to Stop Killer Robots. We're often asked: Do you think this is possible? The answer, always, is yes. A treaty on autonomous weapons is inevitable, but it is up to us - all of us - to determine when it happens.

The members of our coalition come from all walks of life, and we are all driven by different motivations. Dedication to human rights, peace, justice, anti-racism, freedom from oppression, the importance of democracy - the paths that have brought us to this point are as diverse as we are. But we have all come together to speak with one voice. To unite in our vision for a more peaceful future. To stop killer robots.

The awarding of the Ypres Peace Prize to us signifies a moment of renewed hope.

Thank you.