Message by Ms. Izumi Nakamitsu
High Representative for Disarmament Affairs

distributed during the:

Rio Seminar on Autonomous Weapons Systems

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Excellencies,
Ladies and Gentlemen,

I am pleased to send this message to the Rio Seminar on Autonomous Weapons Systems. I commend the Government of Brazil for its initiative to convene this gathering, which I am certain will contribute to the renewed deliberations within the Convention on Certain Conventional Weapons (CCW).

This seminar is especially timely, as it makes good use of the many months we have until the Group of governmental experts recommences its work in June, with a new two-year mandate. We must continue to sharpen and accelerate this work within the CCW.

We are increasingly seeing reports of new weapon concepts and systems being studied, developed and tested that incorporate autonomy into their critical functions. In the absence of common standards and understandings on how international law applies, we face a risk that we will one day see the operation of autonomous weapon systems that cannot be used in conformity with humanitarian principles or the dictates of public conscience.

Secretary-General António Guterres has said on several occasions that, machines with the power and discretion to take lives without human involvement are “politically unacceptable, morally repugnant and should be prohibited by international law.”

The substantive consensus achieved last year, including on the adoption of eleven guiding principles, was an important step forward. Equally important was the agreement on the way forward and the need now to turn to the clarification, consideration and development of aspects of the normative and operational framework. This should entail the effective operationalization of the guiding principles, including the key principle on the necessity of retaining human responsibility for decisions on the use of weapon systems.

There is a real opportunity over the next two years within the CCW to move beyond discussion of abstract principles and to elaborate the elements that should comprise the normative and operational framework.

Narrowing differences on certain outstanding aspects of the legal, technological and military items on the agenda of the Group will be important toward this end. A few of the most critical aspects include: achieving a common understanding on the characteristics of
lethal autonomous weapons relevant to the objectives and purpose of the Convention; how to apply the principle of retaining human responsibility for decisions on the use of weapon systems; clarifying the type and degree of human-machine interaction required to ensure compliance with international humanitarian law; understanding how operational constraints can ameliorate concerns over how to ensure compliance with international humanitarian law and the protection of civilians.

A multi-stakeholder approach will continue to be vital to this process. Various segments of civil society, industry, ethicists, engineers, women, youth and activists have all played an important part in bringing us to this point.

The United Nations Office for Disarmament Affairs remains at the disposal of States to assist their efforts to retain human control over the use of force, in accordance with the Secretary-General’s Agenda for Disarmament.

I wish you a successful seminar.