A high-level U.N. official today opened a four-day conference on lethal autonomous weapons encouraging delegates to take bold action to assure that the ultimate decision to take life remain under human control.

Michael Møller, Acting Director-General of the United Nations Office at Geneva, opened the meeting of experts saying it was “only a first step” in addressing the issue of the weapons systems, which sometimes are called “killer robots”.

The meeting was called by the states parties to the Convention on Certain Conventional Weapons (CCW) and held at the Palais des Nations in Geneva.

Møller, urging bold action, said that international law often responds to atrocities and suffering after the fact.
U.N. official urges action to assure that killer robots remain under human control

“You have the opportunity to take pre-emptive action and ensure that the ultimate decision to end life remains firmly under human control,” he told the delegates.

The International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) was one of the participants at the meeting. In a statement released on Monday the ICRC expressed concern that autonomous robots would not be able to make decisions required by international law like distinguishing between a civilian and a combatant or avoiding the use of disproportionate force.

“The central issue is the potential absence of human control over the critical functions of identifying and attacking targets, including human targets,” Kathleen Lawand, head of the ICRC’s Arms Unit, said in the statement. “There is a sense of deep discomfort with the idea of allowing machines to make life-and-death decisions on the battlefield with little or no human involvement.”

The ICRC said it was calling for new weapons with autonomous features to be subject to a thorough legal review to ensure they are capable of being used in accordance with international humanitarian law, something states are required to do for any new weapon.

The autonomous weapons are of interest to armed forces of different nations as they offer the possibility of increasing effectivity while reducing the risk to soldiers. Some weapons are already fitted with some autonomous features, while others robotic weapons are operated by remote control. The concern of the conference, however, is focused on weapons systems that are becoming increasingly autonomous, raising doubts as to how they could be guaranteed to operate within the law.

During the four days of meetings, the delegates will analyze the ethical, legal and social aspects of the weapons with the participation of the ICRC, a variety of U.N. organizations, experts, academics and non-governmental organizations. The civil society participants included the Campaign to Stop Killer Robots, a group of 51 non-governmental international, regional and national organizations from 24 countries.