Statement on Armed Drones for the United Nations General Assembly's First Committee, October 28, 2014
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Mr. Chairman

Thank you for providing us with the opportunity to speak for the first time in the First Committee on behalf of PAX. Over the last decade, the world has witnessed a new phenomenon in modern warfare: the use of unmanned aerial vehicles (UAVs), more commonly known as drones, in operations conducted by armed forces on the battlefield and by intelligence agencies for extrajudicial killings outside the battlefield.

Drones come in all shapes and sizes and we acknowledge the potential for unmanned systems in a range of civilian applications that could benefit humankind. Even for military applications, unmanned systems could lead to better information on the battlefield, and thus to better informed decisions on where to use armed violence in legitimate military operations.

However, thousands of mothers, fathers, brothers and sisters who have lost their loved ones in lethal drone strikes in Yemen, Pakistan, Somalia and Gaza would beg to differ on the claimed advantages of the use of armed drones in counter-terrorism operations. According to the Bureau of Investigative Journalism, between roughly 500 and 1000 civilians have been killed and many more wounded in these countries.

Communities live in constant fear and civilians ask themselves “Will I be next?” when armed drones hover over their villages day and night. Children fear blue skies, as this is a guarantee for armed drones on the hunt, as cloudy weather limits drone attacks, accord to reports from Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch, as well as the Stanford and NYU Law School Human Rights Clinics.

Anger and frustration is abundant in the areas where innocent civilians have lost their lives, not knowing why they were attacked. We are particularly disturbed that in some areas, every combat-aged male is considered a legitimate target, and can be executed without ever knowing why he was a target.

Mr. Chairman,

In an age of algorithms, data on our social contacts and pattern of life is being used to determine whether we are supposedly a threat. However, this is done without transparency and accountability, even in lethal operations. We need to know why and on what basis people are targeted, in order to be able to determine if such targeting is legal and justified.

In addition, the many ethical and legal questions have spurred debate about how the use of armed drones relates to international humanitarian law and international human rights law. Concerns have
been expressed by UN Special Rapporteurs Philip Alston, Christopher Heyns, and Ben Emmerson in their reports to the Human Rights Council. In many cases, armed drones have been deployed outside of armed conflict to kill people. Such practices run counter to international human rights law, which is the applicable set of rules outside of armed conflict and which requires that suspects be captured and tried before being sentenced.

The lack of transparency by some states over the use of armed drones, hinders the establishment of a clear picture of the number of civilians killed in these drone operations and the standards used to identify those who constitute a legal target. Increased civilian casualties are likely to occur due to the blurred distinction between civilian and combatant in current and future conflicts.

We are also concerned that absence of risk for the belligerent party, and the fairly low costs for using armed drones, could lower the threshold for using armed violence as a means to solve conflict or take out opponents in complex conflict situations.

The practice of extrajudicial killing and other problematic uses of armed drones could set a precedent for other states if it is not strongly condemned by the international community. The growing production and export of armed drones could further exacerbate the problem. Some states have used drones in operations against their own citizens. Non-state actors such as Hezbollah, the Islamic State, and Hamas have used drones for surveillance and (so far unsuccessful) armed attacks.

Mr. Chairman,

We call upon all delegations to:

1. Express humanitarian, moral, security and legal concerns about the growing use of armed drones inside and outside armed conflicts and increased proliferation of armed drone technology.

2. Highlight the need for debate on the application of international law (including international humanitarian law and human rights law) to the question of armed drones.

3. Call for concrete measures on the use of armed drones, such as a moratorium on their use outside regular conflict until a clear framework has been established, condemnation and non-participation in extrajudicial killing, and/or increased transparency about their use and casualty recording practices.

4. Seek limits on proliferation of armed drones to actors that might use them to violate international law, through relevant arms control instruments including the Arms Trade Treaty.

Thank you