REMARKS BY DR. ALHAJI SARJOH BAH, DIRECTOR OF CONFLICT MANAGEMENT DIRECTORATE IN THE POLITICAL AFFAIRS, PEACE AND SECURITY DEPARTMENT, TO THE WORKSHOP ON AUTONOMOUS WEAPONS SYSTEM: AN ECOWAS PERSPECTIVE

FREETOWN, SIERRA LEONE, 17 – 18 April 2024
His Excellency, Dr. Julius Maada Bio, President of the Republic of Sierra Leone,
Honourable Ministers of Government,
Members of the Diplomatic and Consular Corps,
Members of the Media,
Excellencies,
Ladies and Gentlemen,

On behalf of the Commissioner for Political Affairs, Peace and Security, His Excellence Ambassador Bankole Adeoye, it is a singular honour to be back to the motherland to participate in this important conference. I would also like to express the gratitude of the African Union Commission to the Republic of Sierra Leone for inviting the African Union (AU) to this important event on such a timely topic.

The African Union continues to reaffirm its strong support for the important role Sierra Leone plays on the continent and discharging its role as a member of the AU Peace and Security Council and the United Nations Security Council in fostering peace and security.

Today's meeting is very timely, as we are witnessing an unrestricted proliferation of weapons across Africa. It is imperative that we find a lasting solution to this immediate threat to our collective security. In this regard, we must all work together to realise the African Union's Aspiration for a peaceful and prosperous Africa as enshrined in Agenda 2063.

In this context, the African Union views autonomous weapons systems as an emerging threat requiring our urgent attention. This meeting is an important contribution to the larger global discussion on understanding, regulating, and controlling such systems.

At the African Union, we believe that autonomous weapons systems will continue to pose a significant risk for our Member States for the foreseeable future, mainly because these weapons rely on artificial intelligence-based decision-making. As many have predicted, such systems have been easily acquired by non-state actors, with disturbing consequences, particularly across the continent.

Across Africa, the AU is closely monitoring the growing use of drones – both military and weaponised commercial drones in various conflict situations.

In Libya, warring parties, with support from external actors, routinely employ autonomous weapons systems as force multipliers, exacerbating instability in the country and the wider Sahel-Saharan region.
In Somalia, the militant group Al-Shabaab has leveraged knowledge transfer from other conflict zones to utilise drones for reconnaissance and surveillance of African Union troops and Somalia Security Forces, gathering vital intelligence for attacks.

Most recently, in February 2024, the local militia group Wazalendos in Eastern DRC used 'suicide drones' carrying improvised explosive devices to launch attacks against United Nations peacekeepers, highlighting the escalating threat posed by drone technology in conflict zones.

The AU recognises the potential benefits of artificial intelligence (AI), robotics, and other emerging technologies related to Autonomous Weapons Systems. However, we support the position of over 40 AU Member States that called for a legally binding agreement on autonomous weapons systems at the 78th UN General Assembly in 2023.

This position is also consistent with the African Commission on Human and Peoples’ Rights (ACHPR) resolution in 2021 on AI technologies, which calls for a comprehensive legal and ethical governance framework, among other things.

We believe that such an agreement and framework must address critical principles to tackle the complex ethical, legal, moral, and technical questions surrounding autonomous weapons systems. This will ensure that their development and use align with international norms and values.

The principle of direct and meaningful human control is of particular importance to the African Union, ensuring that the final decision-making authority and responsibility remain in human hands. Furthermore, we firmly believe mechanisms must be established to hold individuals and entities accountable for developing, deploying, and misusing Lethal Autonomous Weapons Systems.

The African Union Commission is committed to promoting responsible and ethical use of autonomous weapons systems while safeguarding the principles of international humanitarian law and protecting human rights. We call on all member states to work together to achieve this critical goal.

In 2023, several regional conferences on autonomous weapons systems were held, including ones in Costa Rica, CARICOM, and Manila. These discussions have laid the necessary groundwork for a possible instrument to prohibit or set controls on the use of autonomous weapons. They also require the active participation of African Union Member States.

At the African Union, we remain confident that the Commission’s key initiative, Agenda 2063 and its flagship project of Silencing the Guns (StG) through disarmament and
arms control measures, is aligned with calls for a global and continental instrument on autonomous weapons systems.

Looking forward to the conference’s outcomes, we would like to propose four practical steps that could help in regulating autonomous weapons systems. They include: (1) Including lethal autonomous weapons systems in the ECOWAS Convention, (2) Developing a comprehensive continental position on lethal autonomous weapons systems, (3) the Republic of Sierra Leone leveraging its current membership of the AU Peace and Security Council and the United Nations Security Council to champion the adoption of regional, continental and global regulatory frameworks for autonomous weapons systems, and (4) the development of a Common African Position on autonomous weapons systems and leveraging of the AU PSC and A3 members in the UN Security Council to champion discussions on the development of an international regulatory framework to tackle this potential menace.

Let me conclude by highlighting that today’s meeting presents a chance to mobilise the region and the continent by participating in a timely conversation about setting the standards for the future use of lethal autonomous weapons systems. I urge you to engage in productive discussions and develop appropriate policies.

I thank you.