Press release: Lack of regulation of “remote control” tear gas systems has serious consequences for human rights and risks misuse in armed conflict, new report warns

London, Wednesday 2nd December - A new report, *Tear gassing by remote control*, commissioned by the Remote Control project, has found there is inadequate regulation of “remote control” means of delivery of riot control agents (RCAs) (tear gasses) and that they could be at risk of being misused by both State and non-State actors. The report coincides with the annual Conference of States Parties to the Chemical Weapons Convention (CWC) in the Hague.

*Tear gassing by remote control*, researched by the Omega Research Foundation and Bradford Non-Lethal Weapons Research Project, highlights the States and companies that have developed and promoted unmanned aerial vehicles (UAVs) - drones, unmanned ground vehicles (UGVs) and other remotely operated systems for delivering tear gas or other so-called “less-lethal” weapons. Existing controls are insufficient and there is a failure by the international community to address the regulation of the use and trade of such “remote control” RCA means of delivery. This has potentially serious consequences, including the facilitation of large-scale human rights abuses, proliferation to non-state actors and their employment in armed conflict.

Key findings from the report:

- State bodies or commercial companies including in Austria, Australia, China, France, Germany, Israel, South Korea, South Africa, the UAE and the US are developing or have developed remote control systems that can be employed to disperse riot control agents or other less lethal weapons. Such remote control delivery systems include: indoor fixed-installation dispersion devices; external area clearing or area denial systems; automatic grenade launchers; multiple munition launchers; unmanned ground vehicles and unmanned aerial vehicles.

- Media reports claim that certain military, security, police or correctional services in China, India, Israel, South Africa, Turkey, the UAE and the US have sought to develop or acquire remote control delivery systems. Non-State actors including private security companies have also reportedly explored acquisition of such delivery mechanisms.

- Potential negative consequences of the existing inadequate regulation of the use and trade of “remote control” RCA means of delivery include: possible proliferation to and misuse by non-State actors, employment in armed conflict; and their misuse to facilitate large scale human rights abuses. If left unregulated the continuing research and development activities in this area could eventually lead to the production, proliferation and use of fully autonomous weapons systems.

- To date, the international community has collectively failed to effectively address the regulation of “remote control” means of delivery of RCAs, either within the framework of the Chemical Weapons Convention or international human rights law.

The report concludes that it is critical for the international community to determine constraints upon these devices under international and regional human rights law to guard against misuse. The
report sets out specific recommendations for the Organisation for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons (OPCW) to ensure effective regulation.

Dr Michael Crowley, author of the report, says:

*Our research has uncovered a range of companies around the world actively promoting delivery mechanisms to tear gas people by remote control. This includes devices that can flood prisons with tear gas at the flick of a switch; drones that can drop pepper spray onto the heads of those below; or ground robots that can fire large quantities of rca projectiles at protesting crowds. Given the evident dangers to human rights and human security, the international community should introduce stringent regulations to combat their unregulated proliferation and misuse.*

Caroline Donnellan, manager of the Remote Control project, says:

*This report highlights the extent to which “remote control” RCA delivery mechanisms have been developed and are being promoted and the real potential for misuse. It shows how the international community has yet to effectively address the issue of regulation and the legal framework within which they operate. In the broader context of security by remote control, this is another example of the need for such technological developments to be carefully evaluated in terms of their long term costs and implications.*

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Editor’s notes:

The Remote Control project is a project of the Network for Social Change hosted by the Oxford Research Group. Remote Control examines changes in military engagement, in particular the use of drones, special forces, private military companies and cyber warfare. The project acts as a facilitator for the exchange of information and commissions and publicises work undertaken in the area, aiming to examine the long-term effects of remote warfare.

The Omega Research Foundation (ORF) is an independent UK-based research, investigation and policy organisation. It is dedicated to providing rigorous, objective, evidence-based research on the manufacture, trade in, and use of, military, security and police technologies.

Bradford Non-Lethal Weapons Research Project (BNLWRP) is part of the Bradford Disarmament Research Centre (BDRC) of Bradford University. Its primary objectives are to explore and compile open source information on so called “non-lethal” or “less lethal” weapons, to objectively analyse the implications of their development, proliferation, use and potential misuse for international peace, human security and human rights; and to develop strategies for regulating or prohibiting the introduction and potential use of the most dangerous of these weapons.

Dr Michael Crowley is BNLWRP Project Co-ordinator and a Research Associate at ORF. He has published widely on arms control, security and human rights issues. His latest book, Chemical Control: Regulation of Incapacitating Chemical Agent Weapons, Riot Control Agents and their Means of Delivery, was published by Palgrave Macmillan in November 2015.
Riot control agents (RCAs) are potent sensory irritants normally with relatively low lethality that produce dose and time-dependent acute site-specific toxicity. They are commonly known as tear gasses.

“Remote control” means of delivering RCAs are dissemination mechanisms incorporating automatic or semi-automatic systems where the operator is directing operation of the platform and/or RCA delivery device at a distance from the target.