Malicious use of AI could cause 'unimaginable' damage, says UN boss

Malicious use of artificial intelligence systems could cause a "horrific" amount of death and destruction, the UN secretary general has said, calling for a new UN body to tackle the threats posed by the technology. António Guterres said harmful use of AI for terrorist, criminal or state purposes could also cause "deep psychological damage", and he said AI-enabled cyber-attacks were already targeting UN peacekeeping and humanitarian operations. "The malicious use of AI systems for terrorist, criminal or state purposes could cause horrific levels of death and destruction, widespread trauma and deep psychological damage on an unimaginable scale," Guterres said. Speaking at the first UN security council session on AI, he said the advent of generative AI – the term for AI tools such as ChatGPT that produce convincing text, image and voice from human prompts – could be a defining moment for disinformation and hate speech and add a "new dimension" to the manipulation of human behaviour. Guterres called for the creation of a new UN entity along the lines of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change to tackle the risks. "The overarching goal of this body would be to support countries to maximise the benefits of AI for good, to mitigate existing and potential risks, and to establish and administer internationally agreed mechanisms of monitoring and governance," he said. The UK chaired the session, and its foreign secretary, James Cleverly, opened the proceedings with a call for global governance of AI. "We urgently need to shape the global governance of transformative technologies because AI knows no borders," Cleverly said. "No country will be untouched by AI so we must involve and engage the widest coalition of international actors from all sectors." The UK has convened a global AI safety summit in the autumn, and the chair of the UK government's AI Foundation Model taskforce said on Tuesday that current AI systems still required further investigation by experts. "We don't fully understand why and how they work," Ian Hogarth said. Speaking at an event hosted by the Tony Blair Institute for Global Change, Hogarth said AI could also be a force for good. "We are going to get AI scientists that will complement human scientists and speed up the pace of new science and technology discoveries. It means we can engineer new things, discover new drugs," he said, adding that a malicious actor in the field could also threaten national security.