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Concerns Regarding the Trivialization of DEWs and Violations of International Law

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To the White House,

The current body of international law — comprising international humanitarian law, human rights conventions, and customary principles governing the conduct of hostilities — renders the use of directed energy technologies against human beings, in practice, largely unviable, unlawful, or highly litigable. Instruments such as the Geneva Conventions, the Convention Against Torture, the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, and the principles of distinction, proportionality, and military necessity impose strict limitations on means and methods of warfare that cause indiscriminate suffering, neurological harm, or physiological effects that are not fully understood.

Within this restrictive legal framework, the public claim — even if presented in a jocular tone — by former U.S. President Donald Trump that a so-called “discombobulator” was used during a military incursion involving the capture of the Venezuelan president is deeply troubling. By trivializing the use of a secret weapon against human beings, the head of the executive branch of a major military power not only banalizes state violence, but also rhetorically normalizes the deployment of warfare technologies whose legality, proportionality, and compliance with international law are, at best, highly questionable.

This trivialization becomes even more serious in light of institutional statements by the U.S. Department of Defense indicating the expansion, development, and operational integration of directed energy weapons. Although these systems are frequently described as “non-lethal” or “less-lethal,” they remain surrounded by technical and legal opacity, with potentially severe biological effects — including neurological, vestibular, and systemic harm — whose predictability and reversibility have not been conclusively established.

The controversy is further intensified by the well-substantiated hypothesis, discussed by independent investigators, journalists, and segments of the scientific community, that hundreds of diplomats, intelligence officers, and public servants — victims of what has become known as Havana Syndrome — may have been targeted by directed energy devices. Should this hypothesis be confirmed, it would constitute a pattern of covert attacks against civilians and protected persons under international law, employing technologies that exhibit the characteristics of weapons of war while being used outside any legally recognized framework of armed conflict.

In light of this set of circumstances, presidential rhetoric that treats the use of such devices lightly assumes particularly grave implications. By minimizing or ridiculing the seriousness of directed energy weapons, the President of the United States contributes to the erosion of fundamental norms of international law, weakens mechanisms of state accountability, and sends a dangerous signal of institutional tolerance toward practices that may constitute human rights violations, international crimes, or covert acts of war.

Ultimately, such a posture not only undermines the international credibility of the United States as a defender of the liberal legal order, but also establishes a corrosive normative precedent: that emerging technologies — precisely because they operate in gray zones between military, law enforcement, and clandestine domains — may be deployed without transparency, without accountability, and without respect for the minimum safeguards of human dignity. This precedent represents a systemic risk to the global arms control architecture and to the very notion that state violence can and must be constrained by law.

Sincerely,
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