The death of a Sudanese man in Libya who was shot after being returned to shore by the coastguard has been condemned by UN humanitarian agencies, who on Friday reiterated their call for the war-torn country’s migrant detention centres to close.

According to the International Organization for Migration (IOM), the man was among more than 100 migrants due to be sent back to detention when shots were fired in the air on Thursday.

IOM spokesperson Safa Msheli said today (20 Sep), “the tragedy occurred at Abusitta disembarkation point in Tripoli as many of the 103 migrants returned to shore were resisting being sent back to detention centres.”

Speaking to journalists in Geneva, she explained that the migrant was wounded in the stomach and “despite immediately receiving medical aid on the spot by an IOM doctor and then being transferred to a nearby clinic, he died two hours after admission.”

The identity of those doing the shooting at Abusitta, which is in a military facility, remains unconfirmed.

Msheli said, “IOM staff, who were on the scene to provide aid to migrants, report that armed men began shooting in the air when several migrants tried to run away from their guards,” adding that “the use of live bullets against unarmed vulnerable civilians, men, women and children alike, is unacceptable under any circumstances.”

Some 5,000 migrant women, children and men are still detained in Libya in conditions described as
“inhumane” by IOM.

More than 3,000 are held in areas of active conflict which continues to worsen in southern Tripoli, amid ongoing clashes between the UN-recognised Government and forces loyal to Khalifa Haftar, the UN agency warned.

The development also comes two months after scores of migrants and refugees died in an airstrike on Tajoura detention centre in a suburb of the Libyan capital.

According to one report at the time, a cell was hit containing more than 120 people, some of the more than 600 men, women and children being held at the centre.

Echoing IOM’s condemnation of the latest incident, the UN Refugee Agency (UNHCR) repeated its belief that Libya cannot provide sanctuary for vulnerable people displaced by conflict, natural disaster or persecution.

spokesperson Charlie Yaxley said, “UNCHR condemns this utterly deplorable act. It is now irrefutably clear the refugees and migrants must not be returned to Libya after being rescued at sea,” adding that “it cannot be considered a safe port and at the same time, far greater efforts are needed to provide safe, alternative pathways to asylum so refugees don’t feel so desperate that they risk their lives on these dangerous journeys in the first place.”

The UNHCR official noted that things are getting worse, not better in Libya, where armed militias have fought for control since the overthrow of President Muammar Gadaffi after an uprising in 2011.

Yaxley said, “the situation since April has deteriorated severely and increased fighting means there is a real, renewed sense of urgency about getting people out of harm’s way, out of danger and to safety.”

Latest data from IOM indicates that more than 63,000 migrants and refugees entered Europe by sea so far this year, a roughly 20 per cent decrease from the 78,372 who arrived over the same period in 2018.

Around four in five arrivals were to Greece and Spain (32,767 and 16,894, respectively), while the remainder landed in Italy, Malta and Cyprus. According to IOM, arrivals to Greece are running almost 50 per cent ahead of 2018’s totals, while arrivals to Spain are around 50 per cent lower.