Air Strike on Libya’s Migrant Center Is a ‘War Crime’: UN

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The airstrike killed 44 and wounded around 130 migrants.

United Nations Libya envoy Ghassan Salame condemned Tuesday an attack on a migrant center which killed 44, saying it “clearly amounts to the level of a war crime.”

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An air strike hit a detention center for mainly African migrants in a suburb of the Libyan capital Tripoli late Tuesday, killing at least 44 people and wounding more than 130.

It was the highest publicly reported toll from an air strike or shelling since eastern forces under Khalifa Haftar launched a ground and aerial offensive three months ago to take Tripoli, the base of Libya’s internationally recognized government.

“The absurdity of this ongoing war has today reached its most heinous form and tragic outcome with this bloody, unjust slaughter,” Salame said in a statement.

“Some people were wounded, and they died on the road, on their way running, and some people are still under the debris so we don’t know what to say,” said Othman Musa, a migrant from Nigeria.

“All we know is we want the U.N. to help people out of this place because this place is dangerous,” he said.

Libya is one of the main departure points for African migrants, fleeing poverty and war, to try to reach Italy by boat, but many are picked up and brought back by the Libyan coast guard, supported by the European Union.

Thousands are held in government-run detention centers in what human rights groups and the United Nations say are often inhuman conditions.

The UNHCR refugee agency had already called in May for the Tajoura center, which holds 600 people, to be evacuated after a projectile landed less than 100 meters (330 feet) away, injuring two migrants.

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The hangar-type detention center is next to a military camp, one of several in Tajoura, east of Tripoli’s center, which has been targeted by air strikes for weeks.

“Our teams had visited the center just yesterday (Tuesday) and saw 126 people in the cell that was hit. Those that survived are in absolute fear for their lives,” medical charity Medecins Sans Frontieres (Doctors Without Borders) said in a statement.

The U.N. refugee agency and International Organization for Migration called for an independent investigation and bringing perpetrators to account. “Coordinates of such centers in Tripoli are well known to combatants, who also know (that) those detained at Tajoura are civilians,” the two U.N. agencies said in a joint statement.

In a statement, the Tripoli-based government blamed the “war criminal Khalifa Haftar” for the incident.

From 2014, Libya has had two political power centers, the U.N.-backed government in Tripoli, that is having a hard time governing the capital city and some western areas, and another government in Tobruk, an eastern city which has remained under Haftar's control.

Both sides enjoy military support from regional powers. Haftar’s Libyan National Army (LNA) is supported by the United Arab Emirates and Egypt, while Turkey recently shipped arms to Tripoli to stop Haftar’s assault, diplomats say.

The North-African nation has major oil reserves. It had been under foreign rule for centuries and gained independence in 1951. Colonel Muammar Gaddafi seized power in 1969 and ruled the country for four decades until he was toppled in 2011 by Western military intervention.

The country has since been in chaos with political forces unable to stabilize it. It also transformed in a key point of departure for migrants heading for Europe, and a source of international concern over the rise of Islamists groups.