IMO’s Secretary-General Admiral Efthimios E. Mitropoulos, has expressed his profound sadness for the reported drowning of more than 200 migrants when their vessel capsized in the Mediterranean in the early hours of 6th April.

He acknowledged the role of the Italian Coast Guard in rescuing 53 persons. Reporting on the incident to the in-session Legal Committee, Mitropoulos said, “We were shocked at the number of lives lost and the dreadful circumstances of this disaster. The victims were fleeing the north coast of Africa in search of a better life in the ‘promised land’ but did not survive to live their dream. It was ironic that the devastating news of this latest tragedy reached us while we were holding a meeting with representatives of Italy and Spain to consider what measures countries in the Mediterranean Basin should take to deal with the increasing number of persons leaving North African and Eastern Mediterranean countries to seek refuge in Europe. All we can do now is pray for the souls of those who perished in the incident, which, however, should strengthen our determination to work harder to prevent similar disasters recurring.”

On the incident, IMO is in contact with Italy, Malta and the UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR).

The meeting mentioned above was hosted by IMO and held against a background of increasing movement of persons by sea for political and socio-economic reasons or as a result of armed conflict. It was part of an on-going process aimed at improving existing provisions for rescuing migrants at sea and disembarking them at a place of safety, in accordance with the International Convention on Maritime Search and Rescue (SAR Convention) and the International Convention for the Safety of Life at Sea (SOLAS Convention).

A three-phase system is being put in place at the request of IMO’s COMSAR Sub-Committee.

Phase One will aim at strengthening the SAR provisions in the countries receiving the greatest number of undocumented migrants (Italy, Malta and Spain), in coordination with the office of the UN High Commissioner for Refugees. The system will then be widened to include participation by other States bordering the Mediterranean, while the third phase will be to invite the participation of States outside the Mediterranean region. It was reported that the meeting saw good progress made on the draft text of a regional agreement on the matter for the Mediterranean region.