

Exiled Italians want to go home - to Libya

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Italians kicked out of Libya more than 30 years ago by Muammar Gaddafi wasted no time on Friday planning to look around, after the former coup leader lifted a travel ban on colonialist offspring.

I've got my passport ready. On Monday, I'm going to the Libyan embassy, said Salvatore Volo, 63, who is one of the 20,000 Italians expelled from Libya in 1970.

Let's see if I get the visa, he said, half-joking.

While many Europeans take holiday in Libya, Volo and others born in the former Italian colony - ruled by King Idris in 1943 - have been refused entry since shortly after Gaddafi came to power in a bloodless coup in 1969. Gaddafi, seeking reparations from Italy, also appropriated all Italian property there.

But the Libyan leader is keen these days to help Italy, whose Prime Minister Silvio Berlusconi has visited him many times in a year, more than any other Western leader.

Despite the era of the past, Italy has been a friend of Libya. During the years of sanction, embargo and conflict, Italy has been on the side of Libya, Gaddafi said on Thursday.

Those (Italians expelled in 1970) are still alive...feel nostalgia and a desire to visit Libya. Just a visit to the land I was born and lived. I ask the Libyan people to accept this request.

It wasn't the first time this week that Tripoli has helped Italy sort out migration troubles.

Gaddafi also helped Italy expel more than 1,000 illegal migrants who washed up on southern Italian shores. The controversial air-lift of the refugees before they could be interviewed by U.N. refugee officials.

With Italian financing, Tripoli said it flew the refugees onto Egypt.

Even though I'm against Berlusconi's government, I have to say that it's the only government that's been at the result, said Romano Cardinali, who once owned a sporting goods shop in Tripoli.

Giovanna Ortu, head of the Italian Association for Repatriation to Libya, said the group was still seeking an amount of euros for belongings appropriated by Gaddafi.

But for Volo, Ortu and the others who were born, grew up and live much of their lives in Libya, it's about more than lost property. It's about returning home.

Were foreigners even in Italy, Volo said.

Inside were very Libyan...my heart is very much there.