

Italians plan to see Libya once again

The Associated Press

ROME: Weeks after the Libyan leader, Muammar el-Qaddafi, said Italians expelled from the North African country in 1970 were welcome back, a first group is preparing to return for brief visits.

"I am very glad that the circle is finally closing," Giovanna Ortu, one of seven Italians going back next month, said Thursday.

"It makes me forget all the pain I've gone through in the past years."

All of Libya's Italians — about 20,000 people — were expelled from the North African country in 1970, a year after Qaddafi seized power. The deportations were meant to punish Italy, which had ruled Libya from 1911 to 1941.

The Nov. 1-4 visit will help resolve a longstanding issue that has tainted otherwise good Italian-Libyan relations. It was part of broader efforts by Qaddafi to end decades of international isolation.

Earlier this month, after another major turn by Tripoli, a delegation of Italian Jews visited Libya for talks on possible compensation. About 6,000 Libyan Jews were expelled in an anti-Jewish backlash after Israel's victory in the 1967 Middle East war.

Ortu, 65, a native of Tripoli who was 31 when she was forced to leave, heads an association of Italians expelled from Libya that includes about 2,500 families.

Another of the seven expected visitors, 55-year-old Giancarlo Consolandi, told the Italian newspaper *Corriere della Sera* that he would like to return to the places he knew from childhood, especially Libya's beaches.



Yousef al-Ajely/The Associated Press

Muammar el-Qaddafi, right, and Prime Minister Silvio Berlusconi during a recent meeting in which they discussed allowing the Italians expelled from Libya to visit.

"During summer we would be on vacation for four full months," he reminisced. "Those were carefree moments with our moms, as our fathers were working."

Only a few of the Italians who were forced to leave have been allowed back in the past 30 years, some receiving special permission or invitations from Libyan authorities, said Ortu, who returned herself in 2002.

But the November trip will be the first one after Qaddafi opened the doors to all former Italian residents. The issue was brought up by Prime Minister Silvio Berlusconi during talks with Qaddafi in Libya on Oct. 7.

"I call on the Libyan people to allow the Italians who were born in Libya to visit it once again," Qaddafi said after the talks.

Italy has maintained good relations with its former colony, and Berlusconi has visited Qaddafi four times in the past two years. Italy is also Libya's largest trading partner.

Rome has successfully lobbied the European Union to ease off an arms embargo on Libya, enabling the country to buy high-tech equipment to combat the flow of illegal migrants from Libyan shores into Europe.

While some Italians, like Ortu's father, moved to Libya in the early-to-mid 1910s, tens of thousands went there in the 1930s, during the rule of Fascist dictator Benito Mussolini. They took charge of road construction, power plants and other public works.

Ortu expressed regret that nothing has been done for the compensation of seized assets, which she said were worth some 200 billion lire, or about \$130 million, at the time, according to conservative estimates.

She also noted that the doors have reopened too late for many who were born and lived part of their lives in Libya.

"Many have died," she said, "but there are many youths who want to know the country that was the backdrop of many of their photos."