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Italy, Libya Sign Agreement to Restore Christian Cemetery in Tripoli

By Sabina Castelfranco
 Tripoli

1 December 2004

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The Italian and Libyan authorities have signed an agreement to restore the Christian cemetery in the Libyan capital, Tripoli. It is a desolate and neglected site, where thousands of Italians were buried. It was considered a place of shame - not to be visited. However, as Libya emerges from isolation, this is expected to change.

The abandoned condition of the Italian Christian cemetery in Tripoli is under everyone's eyes. For years, it has been forgotten, as have those who were laid to rest here - 8,500 people were buried in this cemetery, many of them Italians who had come to Libya to work.

The Hammangi Cemetery has been a no man's land for decades. However, like elsewhere in Tripoli, something has begun to change. Fabio Marceglia, an Italian working in Libya, was recently visiting the cemetery with his wife. He says it is in a better state now than when he last came here.

He says there has been a great improvement. He says, last year, it was full of trash and destroyed graves. Now, it has been cleared up a little.

The cemetery had been transformed into an open-air dumping ground after Colonel Moammar Gaddafi overthrew the monarchy and seized power in 1969.

Unknown vandals desecrated hundreds of graves and unearthed the bodies of dead Italians. Their names are still visible on broken tombstones: Mancuso, Gambino, Salviani. They were lawyers, writers, engineers and farmers.

But not all of them are easy to identify. Italian authorities have now launched a project, in cooperation with the Libyan authorities, to

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restore the cemetery and identify all those who were buried there. Italy's consul general to Libya, Carlo Colombo, says the aim of the project is to "give back dignity to the Italians civilians who died in Libya."

The head of the Association of Italians repatriated from Libya, Giovanna Ortu, recently visited the cemetery with a group of Italians who, like her, formerly lived in Libya.

She says an agreement has been signed. She says the Libyans are very open and the Italian foreign ministry has committed itself to financing the project. However, the funds need to be found.

Ms Ortu says more than \$6.5 million will be needed. She says her association plans to launch a fund-raising campaign.

Italians wanting to repatriate relatives buried in Tripoli will be able to request exhumation and transport of the remains back to Italy.

Ms Ortu says many Italians were not allowed to come to Libya for more than 30 years and were unable to visit the graves.

She and the other Libyan-born Italians returned from Tripoli, last week, after a five-day visit. Group members had not returned to Libya since they were forced to leave their homes when Mr. Gaddafi took power. One of them was Giancarlo Consolandi, who left the country when he was 21 years old.

He says the trip was like a dream come true.

Mr. Consolandi, Ms. Ortu and the others are now hopeful many other Italians who lived in Libya before being expelled will be able to follow suit. They hope the Italian burial ground will become like the adjacent British military cemetery, where hundreds of evenly-aligned tombstones are arranged on a well-groomed green lawn.

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