

violence.

Berlusconi then phoned Gaddafi, eager to end quickly an embarrassing diplomatic spat ahead of elections in April.

But on Thursday Gaddafi dismissed the link between the riots and the cartoons, first printed in a Danish newspaper, which have sparked violent protests across the Arab world.

"Libyans hate Italy, not Denmark. Libyans look for any opportunity to burst with anger against Italy since 1911 when Italy occupied Libya," he said.

Italian politicians from all colours condemned Gaddafi's words and Alessandra Mussolini, the grand-daughter of wartime dictator Benito Mussolini who declared Libya a part of Italy in 1938, defended the colonial rule.

"If it hadn't been for my grandfather, they would still be riding camels with turbans on their heads," Mussolini said.

Opposition leaders said the government was also at fault.

"The government over the past years should have done something to resolve this dispute, and that has not been done," said Massimo D'Alema, the head of the biggest centre-left party.

Analysts said that by lashing out at the former colonial power Gaddafi was trying to divert attention from mounting popular discontent at home.

"He is trying to reunite the nation and reassert his leadership, and he's doing this on Italy's back," said Antoine Basbous, head of the Paris-based Observatory of Arab Countries.

"But this is also dangerous. He is giving people the green light for fresh attacks," he said.

((ITALY-LIBYA; Editing by Charles Dick; Reuters Messaging: silvia.aloisi.reuters.com@reuters.net; Rome newsroom +39 06 85224392, fax +39 06 8540568))