

Qassam Rockets at the city of Sderot

Observing first hand: the Qassam rockets Palestinians target at innocent Jewish civilians. The horror is for real. Ari Bussel reports from the city of Sderot, Israel

By Ari Bussel, Israel

A Qassam Rocket is fired at Sderot, a city some half a mile away from the Gaza Strip.

A few hours later I am standing next to the remains of the rocket, in the back yard of the Police Station. The insides are not even dry yet.

The rocket was placed next to hundreds of other rocket shells, piled neatly on pallets, their tails twisted. Not much different from an explosives belt strapped around a person's chest, nails and other metal objects are stuffed inside alongside the explosive material so as to increase the impact: kill and maim as many people.

The rockets' remains look peaceful, ready to be sent around the world to Jewish communities reminding the constant struggle here in Israel. In fact, Jews and Israelis must come to Sderot, to witness for themselves the rebirth of a country, the heroism of the residents, the beauty and force from within.

I was driving from the center of the country South toward Sderot, passing Ashdod and Ashkelon, then the main Gas Terminal, and the signs then read Gaza. My heart starts pounding faster. I am some 20 miles away from Gaza, traveling at 70 mph. It would not be long before I am there. Stopped at a major junction at a stoplight, I decline the request of two youths to drive with me. They both had Yarmulkes and Tzitziot, clear indications they are Jewish. They seemed too young to be terrorists disguised as Jews, but I was taking no risks. I had a mission to accomplish: Visit Sderot to see in my own eyes what does it mean to be under constant rocket attacks by Hamas.

Still ill at ease, I noticed the Israeli flag next to a memorial to a 20 year old soldier. I stopped the car and walked closer. It read, in part: "Forever in our hearts, you separated from us while in service and you have not yet tasted the taste of life."

Moments ago I was afraid, now the spirit lifted: Israel, the Jewish homeland. Yuri Ashorov, the 20 year old soldier, did not give his life for nothing. Back in the car, the 4PM news headlines: "An international doctors organization is calling Israel to allow free passage between Gaza and the West Bank," "the USA has announced its Ambassador to Israel will not participate in the events for the 40th Anniversary of the Unification of Jerusalem." "Germany [holding the current Presidency of the EU Parliament] will not be participating in the Jerusalem celebrations either, also from political reasons."

Convinced more than ever before Israel needs to be strong, as it is left alone, as the two main bodies — the US and Europe — succumb to Islam, the call for free movement will only allow the transfer of terrorists and advanced weaponry into Judea and Samaria, thus making Tel Aviv-Rishon L'Zion-Rehovot-Ashdod-Ramat Hasharon-Ramat Gan, this wonderful Country Center, in the range of rockets.

I knew my mission had to be completed. It only took several minutes to arrive to Sderot. At the entrance to the City, two memorials for the Holocaust. One is on behalf of those residents of Sderot who were part of WWII, either as Jewish soldiers or those who survived the death camps. The memorial was dedicated on the Forth of May, 2007, just ten days ago.

From destruction to rebirth, the heroism

that kept people alive, the instinct to live to which the survivors clung — a thought that would come back as my visit started.

I parked the car next to a kindergarten, across from the Police Station where I was to be met, and asked the teacher if I may ask the kids a few questions. This is an "after school" kindergarten for ages 3 — 6. I asked Nissan, an Ethiopian three year old, what to do if a siren is heard. "We go inside," I was told after the teacher



Qassam rocket in use.

ance before the Supreme Court, the State claimed it can only protect first through third graders.

A recent study by the Home Defense Front shows that only 57% of the classrooms in the 24 educational institutions in Sderot can either provide proper shelter or can be evacuated within 15 seconds or less. The rest cannot.

Those buildings which were partially protected look as if they were taken



Qassam's damages in Israel.

Some dry statistics: Every single road in the City has experienced a rocket falling and exploding. Seven casualties were under the age of five. 1,500 rockets hit Sderot since the withdrawal from Gush Katif: a 'Russian Roulette Reality.' More than 20 types of rockets were aimed at Sderot, including Qassam 1, 2 and 3. Each rocket weighs up to 22 lbs and results in 50 yards of damage, shrapnel flying and hitting everything in its path.

translated "siren" into "TZEVA ADOM," RED COLOR. The kindergarten is not protected, added the teacher, but we, the adults, must not show the fear to the kids.

Sderot, a City of 24,000 saw one sixth of its population leave in the past three years. Less than half a mile from the Gaza border, Sderot has been hit with more than three rockets a day until the "cease fire" that took effect during Thanksgiving last year. Since then, only 1.8 rockets a day, on average, are fired at Sderot. The remaining residents do not leave either because they cannot afford to leave (with mortgage payments based on home values which are three times higher than today's values) or because they believe that if they leave Sderot, we may as well pack our bags and leave this little country, the Jewish Homeland.

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There are lasers directed at Gaza that can detect the heat signature of an incoming rocket. Loud speakers announce TZEVA ADOM (RED COLOR), giving the population 15 seconds to take cover. If you are in the open, you must bend down, kneel next to a wall, or if you can, run into a shelter or a building.

Israel is relying on 15 second warning system, but has not been providing the means to protect the students in K-12 or the local population. In a recent appear-

directly from Sunday morning cartoons: A double cement wall in front of the outer wall of the building; another building is covered with a dome made from metal; yet another building has one third of it enclosed within an outer protective wall. Renderings that I thought were only possible in cartoons, caricatures and drawings are an actual reality, allowing first to third graders in Sderot to continue studying in their classrooms even when TZEVA ADOM (RED COLOR) is heard throughout the City.

I was met by Noam Bedein, a 25 year old man with a pony tail, a captivating smile and a photographer's bag. The son of Americans who made Aliya to Israel some decades ago, Noam moved to Sderot some eight months ago and is now a one person spokesperson operation. Wherever he goes, people greet him, thirsty for his smile, for a good word, for the latest news. While Noam cannot single-handedly take on his broad shoulders the responsibility of the Country, he surely tries.

I asked to stop to talk with some more kids playing next to their mother. "My name is Ari and it is my first visit to your City," I said, extending my hand to the five and a half year old Shoval and to the six and a half year old Timor. "What shall we do if TZEVA ADOM (RED COLOR) is heard from the loudspeakers up there?"

"Drop and hide yourself," says Timor and Nahala, his friend, adds "lie on the ground." The mother adds that a survey was conducted earlier during the day to find out how many of the apartments have a protected room in them. With many buildings a few decades old, with either Ethiopian or Russian immigrants living in them since they arrived to Israel, most apartments do not have proper shelters.

Schools, homes, public places are insufficiently protected. But even if they were, one would need to live in a City completely encapsulated in a protective bubble. Protection is a necessary but insufficient solution to the thousands of rockets being fired from Gaza into the City of Sderot. Just a few days ago, a Hamas spokesperson announced that Hamas now has in its arsenal enough rockets to bombard the Southern part of Israel with hundreds of rockets every single day for at least one year. Hamas has learned the lessons of the Second Lebanon War, has already finished arming itself with tens of thousands of rockets, many with much longer ranges than Sderot.

Noam and I continue to visit the Atego family. On Saturday ten days ago, a day after the dedication of the Holocaust Memorial, the Atego family's home was hit by a Qassam rocket. The family lives in the lower level of a duplex. The Cohen family living upstairs was away that weekend. The missile hit the outer wall, at the roof level. A red police tape now encircles the grass. Four bikes lie on the grass, among stones each weighing several pounds, that flew from the wall.

Two signs written by kids hang on the window. They read: "Blessed He Who Made Us a Miracle." "The Eternal People is Unafraid of a Long Way."

Indeed, it was a miracle. None of Miri's five kids (8, 6.5, 4.5, 2.5 and a seven month old) was playing outside when it happened. None was physically injured. Miri, a teacher, is not alone. As we stand and speak, several other parents approach us. Pnina Simchovitz, in her eight month, is also a teacher. Three of her kids are standing next to us. From the five buildings around us, some 20 kids are playing around in the parking lot. They are all younger than seven. Some white, others black, beautiful kids.

For anyone who wants to see the meaning of true assimilation, Sderot is the place. Miri is married to Moshe, an Ethiopian. Their kids are amazing. Elishiv, four year old, is still not talking to me, but his smile is contagious. Miri asks: "How can I take my Little Prince outside to the Qassams?" But the kids play, seemingly oblivious to the rockets that may, with only a 15 second advance warning hit their street, the parking lot where we are now standing. Miri is upset that ten days after the house was hit, no one came to clean up yet. She says "we were hit and we also need to clean?" I look at Noam, "shall you and I take a few minutes to remove the rocks from the grass?" Noam says we are not allowed to cross the police line. Well, the line is too high for the tallest kid so they do not pay attention to it. They all need to be scattered away from the scene.

To be continued in the next issue, 1029.

Ari Bussel, a local businessman, grew up in Beverly Hills and was involved in various City programs (including teaching CPR for seven years, CERT, Team Beverly Hills). A graduate of UCLA and Stanford, Ari served as a First Lieutenant in the IDF during the First Persian Gulf War. More recently Ari dedicates his time for advocacy on behalf of the State of Israel and inter-faith work with both the Christian and Muslim communities. Ari writes for Israel Jewish Life and can be reached at: aribussel@hotmail.com.