

Sirte, Libya, January 2012



IT WAS so new, it hadn't even been named. But 'New Park', as it was known to residents of Sirte, looked set to be a popular addition to the small city.

With water features, open spaces, sports facilities, a coffee shop and children's play areas, the central leisure area was designed as a place for families to relax together.

Today, it is deserted. Rather than the trickle of water and the noise of children playing, the only sounds to be heard are the huge shards of metal, hanging from the park's ruined coffee shop, creaking in the wind.

If you pick your way through the broken glass, and the huge shell-cases which litter what were once water cascades and fountains, you eventually come to a children's play area.

Bullet holes have been blasted through its slide, climbing frame and other equipment. A 'rocking lion' ride lies in pieces. Just a few yards away, a rocket has gouged a hole in the ground before exploding.

It's just one example of the way in which the Libyan revolution has impacted on the lives of young people in the city. Sirte was Colonel Muammar Gaddafi's birthplace, and the place he fled as he realised his regime was collapsing in the face of the Libyan revolutionaries' progress and demands.



From early September, when he arrived in the city, until October 20, when he was captured and killed, it's estimated 60 bombs per night fell on Sirte. Hundreds of buildings, including homes and schools, have been reduced to rubble. Thousands more have been holed by shells, gutted by fire, or peppered with bullets. On the streets, unexploded missiles pose dangers perhaps even more serious than those of the slowly collapsing buildings.

Children are particularly at risk, because to a youngster, a large, imposing piece of metal, such as an unexploded shell, is an item not of fear, but of fascination. And a building full of holes, bearing scorch marks and emptied of its inhabitants or pupils, spells excitement rather than peril.

Children need to play. In every country around the world, they must be able to relax, and to cut loose. And in post-conflict situations where youngsters like those of Sirte have lain awake at night wondering whether the falling ordnance will hit their homes, or whether an unluckily placed gunshot will injure or kill a friend or family member, it is even more important, to help re-normalise their lives, and help them reconnect with the world around them.

But there are no youth clubs, safe parks or even simple open areas set aside for children in Sirte. Its residents are too busy focussing on attempts to repair their homes, clinics and schools, in short, to rebuild their lives. Save the Children is working within the city, to create safe places for youngsters to socialise with their peers, and enable them to play in safety.

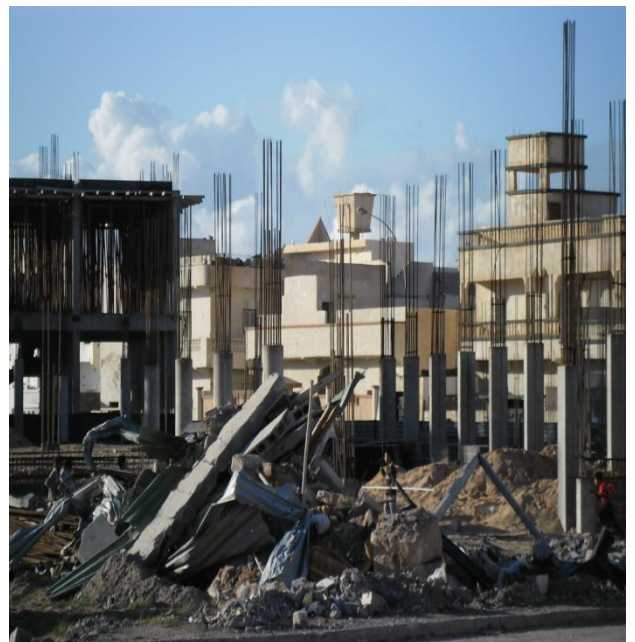
Recent events stress the need for such areas.

On 1 January, a fire broke out at a derelict supermarket in Sirte centre. One of the most noticeable things about the crowd which gathered to watch was the fact that more than half were young children, aged 5-11, who had clambered over a fence, into the store's car park, to get a closer look at the blaze.



As part of Save the Children's assessment of the city's schools, I visited Sana Youssef primary school. It has been almost destroyed by bombs, and is in imminent danger of complete collapse, though it is still just about in one piece.

A couple of days before, a group of youngsters had broken into a semi-demolished construction site, and were playing hide and chase games, oblivious to the dangers posed by falling stonework, or unexpectedly weak sections of buildings.





Missiles have also damaged the school's surrounding wall, meaning even though it is closed, youngsters from nearby houses can sneak in. Most use the expansive playground, or the small football pitches – themselves a little too close to the crumbling building for comfort. But as I took photos and made notes of the damage, a group of six or seven children aged 5-10 approached me, and tugging on my sleeve, led me inside.

From within, the damage looked even worse. The ceilings which had not collapsed were sagging ominously, interior walls bore large

shell holes, and rubble and the building's exposed, broken, steel supports starkly indicated the danger posed to anyone entering.

The youngsters were not concerned. They showed me the stairs – holed and broken in places – and clearly intended to climb them. I stopped, told them no and led them back outside. They promised never to enter the building again, but I had to leave before they did, and in any case, they are not the only children in the area. This school, despite its dangers, is clearly an attractive venue for play.

Save the Children has opened three activity centres in the city. Fifteen more are planned. They contain play equipment and run activities, to offer young people a safe place to play, draw, write, and if they want to, talk about their recent experiences. They are vital to the recovery of the city's youth, and its continued safety.

But we need your help.

For a donation of £3,125, you can help us create one carpeted centre, with a capacity of 30 children at a time.

It will contain cushions, art materials, games, table tennis and table football tables, a CD player, electricity, heating and lighting.

For £46,875 we can open all 15. You can help us provide a better standard of living for around 40,000 children in Sirte, whose lives have been torn apart by a war they played no part in.