

Sirte, Libya, February 2012

THEY SAY if you ask a silly question, you'll get a silly answer.

So it is, when I ask Sa'ad Mufteh to explain why the school he runs desperately needs windows and chairs, he shoots a strange look at me, and talks sharply.

My translator shuffles his feet, and looks at the ground.

'He says it's because the children here will have to stand up all day, and they will be freezing and catch diseases.'

We are stood in a classroom at Al Fateh school, in the northern Libyan city of Sirte. Posters drawn by youngsters hang on the walls, the lights are on, and desks are facing where the teacher should be standing. But behind the rows of tables, small lockers to be used by students are dented and broken, nine of sixteen panes of glass are shattered, and above one window, a hole gapes where a rocket has smashed its way through the wall.



Al Fateh school opened for students on January 7, the day before we visited.

Three months after the Libyan revolution ended, Sirte is struggling even to begin to return to normal.

The city was Colonel Muammar Gaddafi's birthplace, and the city in which he spent his final days.

He fled there in early September 2011, as it became clear his regime was close to being overthrown by revolutionary forces.

Those troops, backed by NATO ground forces and ships

positioned off Sirte's coast, surrounded the city. Residents say more than 60 bombs per night rained on the city until Gaddafi's capture and death on October 20.

The vast majority of residents – well over 149,000 of the 150,000 people who lived there – escaped the city. But they returned to destruction. Thousands of buildings had been destroyed. Many thousands more are peppered with bullet-holes, have been gutted by fire and have had holes several metres wide blasted through them by rockets and other missiles.

Sirte's schools are no exception. There are 25 in the city. Two have been bombed so heavily all traces of them must be cleared before a complete rebuild can begin. Others have suffered serious structural damage, which could require extensive work, taking several months to complete.

But at 17 schools, there are more simple, but immediate, needs. Windows are broken at every school – every single window in some cases. Classroom and school entrance doors have been broken, smashed off their hinges, or shot through by looters. Most have breaks in their electricity supply, which must be fixed for lessons to begin, and need urgent replacement of water pipes to enable children to use the toilet, or drink water during the day.

At Al Halood, a small primary school fondly known to locals as 'the school in the hole' because it sits in a small sand bowl near Sirte's centre, headteacher Dabnoon Ibrahim confirmed his first priority was replacing windows.



At Al Halood school, the pipes are broken and water pumps, to carry clean water in and dirty water out, have been stolen or smashed

He said: 'The situation is desperate because it's winter time. We can't expect children to learn when they are shivering because there are no windows. We have eight rooms for teaching and all are missing at least two windows. It's vital.'

But as he took me around the school, a second problem came to light.

Mr Ibrahim said: 'The water is not working. Pipes have been smashed by missiles. Others were broken by soldiers who came here as the revolution ended. It means pupils can't use the toilets. We can bring in drinking water by car, but only if people can do that every day. We must fix it.'

Al Itihad Al Afreakee is a large secondary school near Sirte sea-front. Missiles have blown two large holes through its walls, and another in its ceiling. Unlike at some other schools, they have not caused serious structural damage, in part because it's a one-storey building.

The school has taken on 350 students from Haldoon, one of the two schools in the city which has been bombed into destruction.

But its shell-holes are patched up with wooden board. All 144 of its windows are shattered, and 19 doors must be bought and hung. The school staff fixed the plumbing enough for water to run, but Ali Hassan, the school's headmaster said: 'We have been told it's temporary only. We hope it will keep working, but at some point soon, we must replace it. There is no money for it, but the school needs water. It's winter. We have no windows, so the water comes in that way. Maybe, we can try to catch it as it does.'



He smiles, and shrugs. It's meant as a joke, but without assistance, it's not far from becoming the reality for the city's 19 open schools, and its 15,000 school children.

Save the Children is the only humanitarian aid organisation based in the city of Sirte. Its emergency response team is working to ensure Sirte's children can return to education, as is their right under international law, in schools which are weatherproofed and safe, both structurally and hygienically.

We will use a donation of £5,000 to purchase and pay for the installation of all the windows in one school. £10,000 would purchase and replace all its windows and doors. A

donation of £15,000 would see windows and doors replaced, and a school's plumbing system completely repaired.

There are 19 schools open in Sirte: we will not overlook any of them in this process.