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An Israeli Playground, Fortified Against Rockets

An Israeli girl who was dressed for the Jewish holiday of Purim climbed in a play area.

SDEROT, Israel — A year ago, as Hamas rockets from Gaza rained down almost daily on this Israeli border town, Stanley M. Chesley, president of the Jewish National Fund, was on a solidarity visit here and realized that he saw no children playing outdoors. It was too dangerous.

Mr. Chesley, an aggressive class-action litigator from Ohio, decided that something needed to be done, and he had an idea.

"These kids can't go to a park, so let's build a park inside where they can go," he remembered telling his colleague Russell F. Robinson, chief executive of the fund, a century-old Zionist organization that collects coins in blue metal boxes in synagogues and Jewish centers.

That is how a 21,000-square-foot bunker of a recreation center was born and came to be inaugurated this week in the industrial sector of this city. It has a small indoor soccer field, video games, fun-house mirrors, a climbing wall, rooms for birthday celebrations and $1.5 million worth of reinforced steel.

Israel went to war in late December to put an end to the rockets, and though it pummeled Gaza for three weeks, killing some 1,300 people and destroying hundreds of buildings, the rockets have not stopped. On Tuesday, five fell around the Sderot

Sderot is a frequent target of rocket attacks from Gaza.

The recreation center has a small indoor soccer field, video games, funhouse mirrors, a climbing wall, and rooms for birthday celebrations.

area. Since the war ended on Jan. 18, some 160 mortar rounds and rockets, including nine long-range ones, have been launched from Gaza at Israel.

So while the country's leaders consider their options and their warplanes continue to hit arms-smuggling tunnels and to kill militant leaders in Gaza, and while Hamas tries to persuade Israel and the world to end the economic siege on Gaza that it says is the main motive for the rockets, children in Sderot now have a safe place to play.

The site, an abandoned textile warehouse, has been refurbished with $5 million from the Jewish National Fund and painted in cheerful colors.

Although not every part of the roof is protected against rockets, the building has many reinforced areas that double as functional spaces, including the soccer field and a computer room. When a rocket is launched, a siren sounds to give residents 15 seconds to take shelter, making it easy for those inside the center to move to the reinforced parts.

That time frame did mean, however, that the center would not get the merry-go-round that had originally been planned; shutting it down would have taken more than 20 seconds.

Hourly shuttle buses to the play center will operate from the middle of town.

"This is the biggest blue box in the world," said Mr. Chesley, referring to his group's familiar containers, as the first children, dressed in costumes for the Jewish holiday of Purim, spread throughout the building.

Ronald S. Lauder, who is chairman of the fund and attended the park's inauguration, said in an interview that he was struck by the historical parallels that Purim invoked. The holiday, recounted in the biblical Book of Esther, celebrates the deliverance of the Jews from a Persian king who, it is said, had planned to kill them on the advice of his adviser, Haman.

Today, too, Mr. Lauder contended, Persia's heirs in Iran harbor ill intent toward Israel's people, as manifested by their arming of Hamas and Hezbollah and by their fiery anti-Israel language.

"Isn't it amazing how history repeats itself?" he said.

The new recreation center has two rooms set aside for counseling and a staff of mental health workers. Emotional trauma among the young is an area of great focus not only in Israel, but also in Gaza.

Ann M. Veneman, the executive director of Unicef, who had just spent a week touring Gaza, the West Bank and Israel, said she was deeply concerned about the recent war's effect on children on both sides of the border.

"The children are the innocent victims with the nightmares," she said in a telephone interview. "I visited Sderot, and I am happy to see how many psychologists they have there. In Gaza, that is not the case. With 56 percent of the population under the age of 18 and so many schools severely damaged, there is an incredible amount of work to be done there."

Children scaled a climbing wall on Tuesday.