

# US-Israeli Group Aims to Shelter Rocket-Plagued Israeli Towns

**Julie Stahl**

**Jerusalem Bureau Chief**

Jerusalem (CNSNews.com) - A private Israeli-American non-governmental organization has stepped in to help provide portable bomb shelters for residents of the rocket-beleaguered southern Israeli town of Sderot and other communities to resolve a desperate shortage in shelters and hopefully help save lives.

Sderot and other Israeli communities situated near the Gaza Strip have been struck by more than 1,570 Kassam rockets since 2001, more than 130 of them since last Tuesday. Nine people have been killed, including Shirel Friedman, 32, on Monday night in Sderot.

Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Olmert, who visited the town earlier this week, said that there was neither an "immediate" nor an "absolute" solution to the kassam rocket attacks.

Israel carried out seven air strikes overnight against Hamas targets and an Islamic Jihad weapons factory in the Gaza Strip, but before 8 a.m. on Friday, four rockets launched from the area had already crashed into Israel. Both groups claimed responsibility.

But what has made the situation even worse for Israeli residents of the area is that most do not have adequate shelters either in public places or their homes.

About 40,000 people live in the seven-kilometer (4.2-mile) range outside the Gaza Strip, including the 23,000 residents of Sderot, the city hardest hit by the rocket fire. There are some 80 public shelters in Sderot, said an official in Olmert's office.

But Sderot spokesman Yossi Cohen said that only 36 of the shelters are in good shape. The rest of them, built in the 1960s and '70s, are badly in need of renovations, said Cohen.

As for outside shelters, the government has placed a few concrete bunkers in public places to provide quick protection for citizens when they are outside, but the situation is not simple, he said.

But an organization called "Operation LifeShield (OLS) is trying to help fill the gap by providing "portable" bomb shelters that can be deployed anywhere in Israel when the need arises. One was deployed earlier this week by a kindergarten in Sderot, the group said.

Co-founded by dual Israeli-American citizens Josh Adler and Shep Alster, Operation

LifeShield is a non-governmental organization (NGO) that says it is running an "emergency campaign" to raise funds to provide "42-ton, rocket-proof shelters" called LifeShields.

"Though we cannot provide these communities with peace, it is certainly within our power to provide them with some peace of mind," Adler told journalists at a press conference in Jerusalem this week.

The idea for the LifeShield shelters was born out of last summer's war between Israel and Hizballah, when the Iranian-backed group launched about 4,000 missiles at northern Israeli communities. Many people did not have proper shelters in which to seek cover.

The shelters, which cost \$36,000 each including delivery, can be placed in the open air and public spaces to provide safety for Israeli citizens as they go about their daily lives and can be moved to another location if the need shifts.

According to OLS, the freestanding, above-ground structures can hold up to 30 people temporarily and prevent the penetration of bullets, shrapnel and missile fragments, as well as withstand a direct missile hit.

While building an underground shelter can take months, these pre-manufactured shelters can be delivered immediately, the group says. One was deployed last summer during the Israeli-Hizballah war on the helipad of a northern Israeli hospital.

In the area around Gaza, the situation is acute. Residents have only 15 seconds to take cover when the "Red Color" alert siren sounds.

American Christian radio broadcaster Earl Cox, who is supporting the project, said that portable units would allow children to go out and play even when there is a threat of rocket attack because they would be able to take cover quickly.

Cox said that nothing is more important to Israel "than to be able to protect their people when they are attacked by radical Muslims [and] by Hamas, who fails to recognize Israel as a state."

A 'viable solution'

At least 11 mayors and local and regional council offices, many from northern Israel, have requested help from the group, according to letters found on its website. Among them is the Eshkol Regional Council, which represents 29 communities in the Negev Desert region around the Gaza Strip.

Sderot Mayor Eli Moyal welcomed the contribution as a "viable solution" for his community.

An official with Israel's Home Front Command also welcomed any help that such a group

would want to give. He said that there is a need for such shelters now because the government's priority is to build security rooms in private homes and not to place security cubes in public places.

When Israel withdrew from communities in the Gaza Strip in 2005, it removed freestanding security cubes and placed all 104 of them at bus stops and other public places in communities around the strip, the official said.

One was placed near the soccer field in Sderot, but other places in the city have no such shelters, said the official.

When asked earlier this week what they would do if the alarm sounded warning of an incoming rocket, many residents said they would simply leave the top floor of a building or would seek protection by standing by a wall.

Resident Danny Dahan said earlier this week that if the government isn't willing to stop the rockets, it should at least provide protective shelters for the people.

Dahan, who runs the family-owned supermarket in the town, said it would make a big difference in his business and for his customers if there were shelters outside his store so shoppers knew if the alarm sounded that there was an incoming rocket, they had a place to take cover.

Although one might expect Israel to be better prepared against the threat of rocket attacks, former head of northern command Israeli army reserve Col. Amos Lotan said that Israeli governments for the past 50 years never expected to need so many shelters.

"That's why so many shelters are needed," said Lotan, who is also involved in the OLS project. "We're living in a situation that you don't know where and when it will be needed the next day."

Olmert spokeswoman Miri Eisen said that part of the reason there are not enough shelters now is because the country was expecting peace.

From 1992 (about the time of an international peace conference in Madrid), the Israeli government decided that newly constructed buildings did not have to include bomb shelters, Eisen said by telephone.

Only in 1996 did Israel pass a law that newly built homes and apartments had to include a private security room, but contractors often ignored that rule, Eisen said. Now everyone is looking to the government to provide protection, she said.

In Sderot alone, an estimated 5,000 apartments or houses need security rooms, an official in the prime minister's office said. The average cost of building each room is 80,000 to 100,000 shekels (\$20,000 to \$25,000), he said.

The estimated budget for building security rooms or shelters for all the residents in the target zone is up to 900 million shekels -- a quarter of a billion dollars.

During the past two years, the government has spent 300 million shekels (\$75 million) to reinforce and build protective rooms in 170 schools and kindergartens in the targeted areas, the official said.