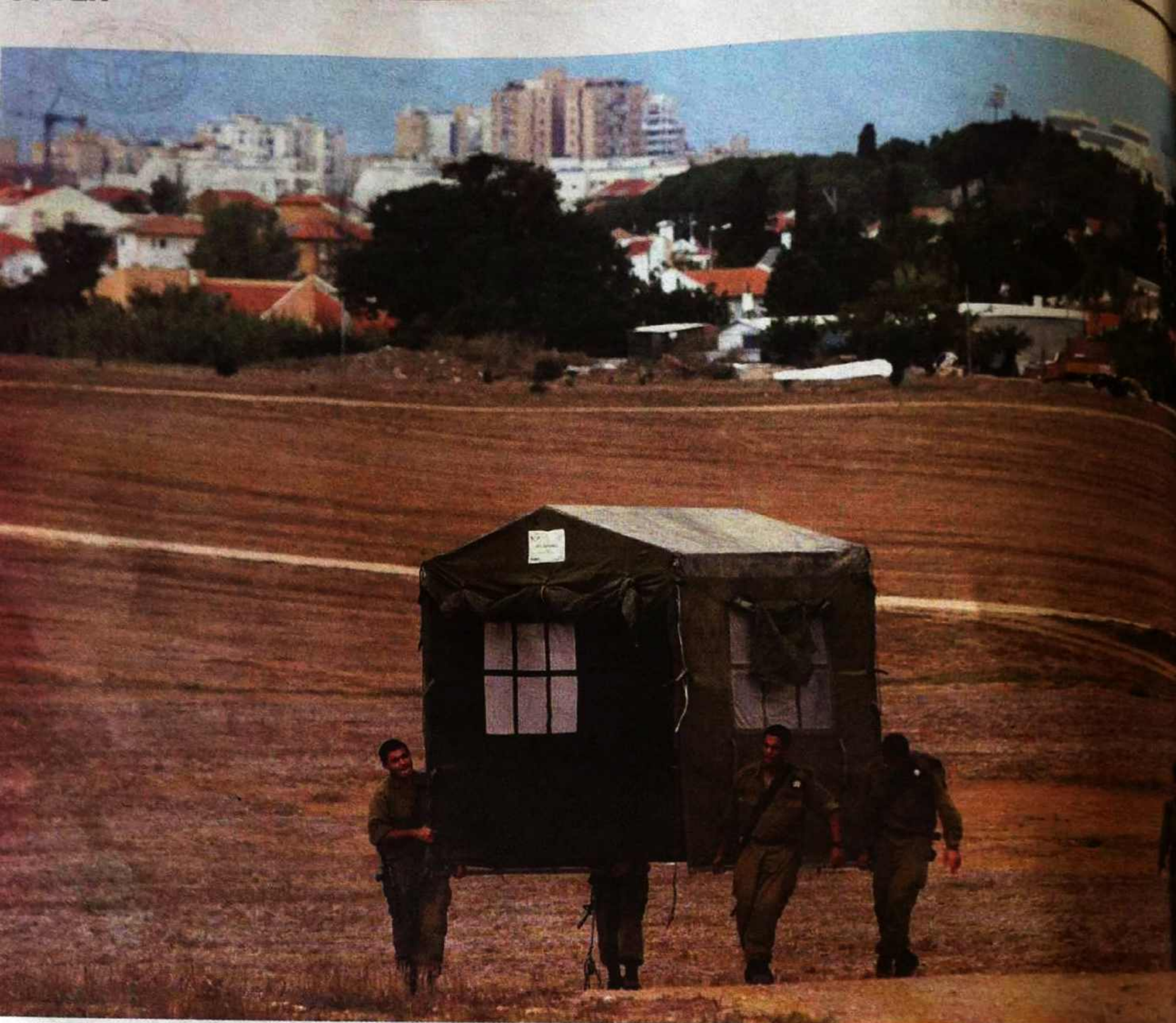


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MAGAZINE

The real perspective

A new program aims to teach residents in the South how to speak to the media and portray the experience of life and terror under constant rocket fire



SOLDIERS carry a shelter near an Iron Dome battery in the South.

A personal point of view

A different angle on terror in the South

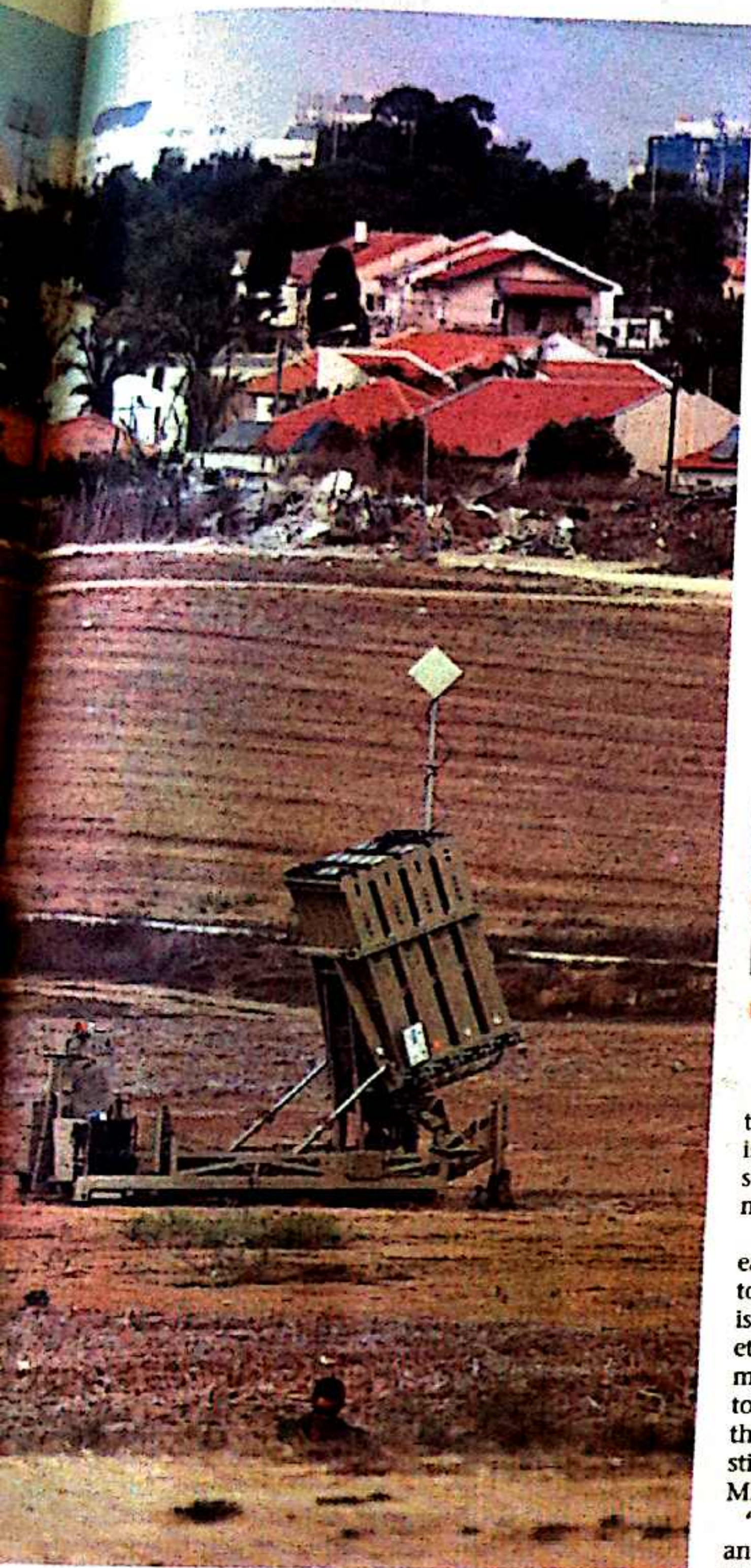
• ANAV SILVERMAN

Ronit Minaker is on two phones answering questions from Israeli and foreign press. To one she gives out the phone number of the head of foreign agricultural workers in the Negev, following up on

a rocket attack on a chicken coop which critically wounded two foreign workers. To the other, she gives directions to a home that was just struck by a rocket a few hours earlier. Two minutes later, she's on a motorcycle with another reporter, taking him to a kibbutz that has been just hit by a mortar. While on the motorbike, she's answering questions from yet another journalist on her cell phone.

It is Wednesday, October 24, and more than 60 rockets have been fired at southern Israel from the Gaza Strip. A large majority of those rockets have fallen in the area of the Eshkol Regional Council, where Minaker has been working as spokeswoman for the past four years.

"It's not an easy job," Minaker tells *The Jerusalem Post* a week after the rocket escalation in the South, where 80 rockets and mor-



(Reuters)

tars were fired between Tuesday night and late Wednesday afternoon. Fifty-four of those rockets pounded Eshkol, which shares a 40-kilometer boundary with Gaza.

"As spokeswoman for the region, I have to get to the situations that I know will interest the media, like a house that has been hit. At least 50 journalists and photographers are in touch with me and I direct them to the hot spots," says Minaker.

"When I work with foreign press, I put them in touch with people who speak their language that are living in the region. I have Italian, German, French, Spanish, and English speakers ready to relate their personal stories," Minaker explains.

"You have to be so sensitive to what the residents are going through during these situations," Minaker says. "Suddenly a man whose home has just been struck, whose world has collapsed, who no longer has a place to drink his morning coffee – has to deal with 10 pho-



RONIT MINAKER, spokeswoman for the Eshkol Regional Council, assists the press during an interview.

(Courtesy: Yehoshua Gigi)

tographers swarming around to take a picture of what is probably one of the worst days in his life. I try to help someone like that by giving him some guidance and mediating with the press.

"During escalations, getting the media's attention is easy: there are items that can be physically photographed like a damaged home. The challenging part is during times of 'calm' – when the three weekly rockets that fall on our region in open areas, [that] are of no media interest. There is no blood, no devastated homes to photograph. But the trauma that results among residents, still exists just as it does during a rocket escalation," Minaker says.

"There are children who go back to wetting their beds and 14-year-olds who are scared to leave their homes. Sleepless nights and nightmares affect everyone. There is no awareness to the continuing after-effects of rocket attacks in general in the media," she adds.

According to the IDF, in the past 12 years over 12,000 rockets have been fired at Israeli civilians by Hamas and other terror organizations in the Gaza Strip. In 2012, there were 610 rocket attacks, of which 150 occurred throughout October.

IT IS the difficulty in communicating the silent pain of residents living under constant rocket fire that recently prompted Sderot Media Center director Noam Bedein to develop a new advocacy training program for residents in the region. Called "Ambassadors of Tomorrow," the program seeks to teach area residents to speak up and share the experience of life under rocket fire with visiting groups and foreign press coming to the region.

"The goal of the program is to have the participants trained as advocacy ambassadors for areas under rocket attack, as people who live and experience the rocket fire themselves," Bedein explains.

"Each year, there are anywhere between 8,000 and 10,000 international visitors that pass through Sderot

Media Center to visit the region and learn about the rocket situation. These include foreign diplomats, government officials, international press, community and religious leaders, student groups, celebrities, and tourists" continues Bedein, who has been advocating on behalf of Sderot residents for the past seven years.

"By the end of the program, some of these participants will be able to work as guides with these groups and share their perspective with the wider world."

A large number of this year's 20 participants are students at Sapir Academic College, located outside of Sderot. Thus far, participants have taken part in educational seminars with local businessmen, mental health experts, psychologists, security officers, media experts, educators and spokespeople like Ronit Minaker, who all highlight how rocket attacks impact life on many different levels.

For Yoel Ben-Haim, a student at Sapir, who lives on Kibbutz Dorot in the northern Negev, the program has been a unique experience. Ben-Haim, 26, whose family made aliya from Paris to Kfar Saba when he was 10, is studying communications.

"When I tell my family in Kfar Saba about life in Sderot, it is hard for them to imagine," he says. "I can identify now much more with the people who have lived here all their lives. In one lecture, the director of the Sderot Mental Health Center, Dr. Adriana Katz, spoke to us about how no one really understands the psychological price that people here pay, even the people themselves. I'm starting to understand the stress behind the face. The probability of a Kassam directly hurting you is not so great, but in terms of quality of life and sense of security, it is definitely harmful. Even businesses and industry in the area have been harmed," Ben-Haim says.

For Bar Kiassi, from Tel Aviv, the decision to study at Sapir and take part in the Ambassadors for Tomorrow program was a little more personal.

"My mother is from Sderot and even though I grew up in the center of the country, I always wanted to ➤

'I've learned a lot more about Sderot and the rest of the region. I now see how the children and the elderly have to handle some very scary scenarios – just 15 seconds to get to shelter once the siren goes off'

connect more to my mother's city and my grandmother, who still lives in Sderot," she explains.

"I'm here because I want to be able to tell my grandma's story – not only to visitors from abroad but to Israelis back in Tel Aviv. Most importantly, I want to express myself clearly on this topic," she says with a smile.

"My grandma is 80 years old. The first time I heard the 'Color Red' [alarm] when I visited her, I panicked and she laughed. She has been living here for 50 years and refuses to move despite the situation. During Operation Cast Lead, my family tried to get her to come to Tel Aviv but she refused. She came straight from Morocco to Sderot and hasn't moved since.

"Thanks to Ambassadors of Tomorrow, I've learned a lot more about Sderot and the rest of the region. I now see how the children and the elderly have to handle some very scary scenarios – just 15 seconds to get to shelter once the siren goes off. My grandma in the recent rocket escalation managed the situation a little better because she now has a shelter, which was completed more than six months ago. She no longer has to walk down four flights of stairs to get to the public bomb shelter," says Kiassi.

"With our classes canceled in Sapir because of the rocket threat, I got to spend more time with her last Wednesday," says Kiassi, who lives in the student dorms in Sderot, close to her grandmother. "Eventually, I want to bring people from central Israel to visit the periphery and see the way of life here – not only the rockets and sirens, but also the difference in the quality of education and the need for more economic development here."

Kiassi has already participated in a Sderot Media Center tour with a group of visitors from abroad.

"The scariest part is if the Color Red siren goes off when you're leading a group," she says.

One of the educators in the Ambassadors of Tomorrow program, Eitan Horn, an experienced tour guide with the Jewish Agency, trains the participants for exactly those kinds of scenarios. In one training session, Horn explains what to do if the Color Red goes off.

"The No. 1 rule is not to panic," he explains to the participants. Horn gives guidelines as to how to calm groups in such a situation and what safety procedures to follow.

"I've been through all the scenarios that I bring up to these participants, guiding groups in the western Negev region," emphasizes Horn. "I speak from experience."

He also brings up difficult questions that groups will throw his way.

"I get asked questions like 'Why are you only discussing what Israeli residents are going through? Why not Gaza? What about all the Gaza casualties from air strikes?' You have to be prepared to answer these questions because they come up."

During this particular training session, Sderot Media Center's Bedein further elaborates on what Horn had to say. He explains to the participants how international media coverage of the rocket attacks completely distorts the outside observer's perspective of Israel's reality.

In one presentation, he shows how head-



AFTERMATH OF rocket damage in an elementary school classroom.

(Courtesy: Avi Ohayon/GPO)

lines from major international news sources all address Israeli air strikes on Gaza and the casualties that followed, with little or no mention of the rocket attacks on Israeli civilians. Bedein, who presented the official Israeli narrative of the impact of rocket attacks during the Goldstone Commission investigation into the Gaza conflict in 2009 at the UN, believes that context is the most important element.

"As an advocate for Sderot and the region, I explain to groups that you have to keep the intentions of both sides in mind – the intentions of Hamas terrorists who aim to target Israeli civilians by firing rockets from civilian-populated areas in Gaza, to the intentions of the IDF, which aims to stop the terrorists from doing so. This is what has to be made clear to an international audience."

Ambassadors for Tomorrow also has older participants raising families in the region who are part of the program. Ognia Schcolnik of Kibbutz Bror Hayil, which is located in the Sha'ar Hanegev Regional Council in the northwestern Negev, close to Sderot, is one of them.

Schcolnik, who is Brazilian like many of the residents of Bror Hayil, says she doesn't like politics.

"I'm here to learn what the rest of the region is going through and how the media works. In Brazil, Israel is always shown in a negative light. In Bror Hayil, there has never been one rocket attack, so our reality is dif-

ferent even though the kibbutz is part of Sha'ar Hanegev, which has absorbed many rocket attacks," Schcolnik explains.

"I don't even have a shelter and I am truly more afraid when I'm traveling outside the kibbutz than when I'm home. The kibbutz members here joke that maybe God is Brazilian and stops the rockets from falling here," she says, adding that, "Now, with all this information, I will be better equipped to explain to the Portuguese-speaking press what is going on outside the kibbutz."

For Ronit Minaker, Ambassadors of Tomorrow gave her the opportunity to speak about her work as a spokesperson with regular Israelis.

"It was interesting to talk to the participants and to see how Israelis who haven't lived in the region all their lives don't necessarily understand what the emergency situation routine is all about. It showed me how important it is to create awareness even within Israeli society to the life we live in Eshkol and the rest of the south."

One thing is for certain for Minaker, who lives on Kibbutz Nir Yitzhak, located in Eshkol: "In these crazy emergency situations, with the sirens going off every hour and the rocket explosions that follow, I will always be here answering my phone." ■

The writer is an educator at the Hebrew University High School and a writer based in Jerusalem.