

LEBANON

Recreation activities join Lebanon's youths and children together on the road to recovery from conflict

It looks like summer camp in the village of Ziftar in southern Lebanon. The quiet of the forested, mountain-facing park is broken only by the sound of children singing and clapping, as activity facilitators prepare for the art activities of the afternoon.

But last summer, rather than the sounds of nature or singing, these children heard the chilling sounds of war. Bombs and artillery fire pierced the air during more than a month of conflict between Hezbollah and Israeli forces. The memories of these sounds are haunting.

"I'm better now, I just try very hard to forget the war, because it was very frightening," says 13-year-old Christine. "If someone is talking about the war, I automatically change places."

A year later, Christine is one of more than 60 youths participating in a special summer programme supported by UNICEF and run by partner non-governmental organization InterSOS. The youths, aged 13-17, are working in groups this morning to facilitate creative, interactive activities for younger children in the afternoon.

UNICEF and InterSOS have been in partnership to provide child-friendly spaces and recreational activities for children and youths in southern Lebanon since the war ended last August. Restoring normal play and social activities, as well as providing opportunities for self-expression through art, games or simply interacting with peers, are critical in helping children and youths recover from distress after emergencies.

This summer's programme benefits both youths and children in villages near InterSOS' three hubs: Tyre (Sour), Nabatiyeh and Bint Jbail – all regions heavily affected by last year's conflict. Each week, youths reach out to children in a different village through a five-day schedule, with activities on a different subject each day. The teens spend the morning learning about topics, such as first aid, environmental responsibility, the dangers of unexploded cluster bombs left over from the war, and child rights. They then work in groups to develop activities for their afternoon session with the children.

For Christine, it's a very rewarding experience. "They (the children) are very happy each time they learn something new. We feel that they are keen every day."

Twelve-year-old Zahra, one of the participants in today's activities, agrees. She is eager to try to express her feelings in English. "I'm from Beirut and I came here to spend in Ziftar my best summer vacation. I came here for two days and I am having much fun. I couldn't describe it."

As community-based programmes like this one are helping children and youths to recover from past emotional scars, new crises in Lebanon cast a shadow over their progress. In recent months, ongoing political instability and bombings around the country have escalated, bringing a renewed sense of anxiety. Even in southern Lebanon, youths are very aware of the seriousness of the current Palestinian refugee camp crisis in the north of the country. "I'm really sad about what is happening in the north," says Christine. "I hope Lebanon will get its peace back."

As children of different religious and cultural backgrounds sit side-by-side, discussing ideas, drawing, laughing and singing together, this park is a refuge not only from the memories of last year's war, but also from the shadow of new fears. The universal language of play gives hope that Christine may someday get her wish for peace.