

Residents help orphaned children

Dubai sends 300kg of supplies to needy in Sierra Leone

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DUBAI // Weak and malnourished, with burns covering most of her body, Grace Ashley was not expected to survive the night after being discovered by a watchman outside the gates of a house in Freetown, Sierra Leone.

But just five days after receiving life saving medical treatment from doctors at a nearby orphanage, the 20-month-old baby is smiling again and preparing for a new life at the All As One (AAO) Children's Centre.

Grace is one of more than 50 abandoned children who have found refuge at the AAO in Sierra Leone's capital. Unfortunately, such stories are all too familiar to the AAO's staff, but they have reached the ears of Dubai residents and inspired donations for a shipment of much-needed supplies to the centre.

"It is common for children to be abandoned in this way," said the AAO's founder Deanna Wallace, who was speaking of Grace's plight from Freetown yesterday. "Usually it is due to extreme poverty and/or a situation that would require medical treatment beyond the means of the person caring for the child.

"The gateman who discovered Grace took her to the Ministry of Social Welfare, Gender and Children's Affairs, which in turn called us to come and take the child into care. We suspect she was burnt with scalding water, perhaps accidentally. Maybe she turned a pot of

boiling water over on herself by accident, we are not sure."

Ms Wallace said the AAO, which has a registered non-profit office in Dubai and headquarters in the United States, had admitted several children in the past few months. She felt the outlook for thousands of children in Sierra Leone showed little sign of improvement.

"We have about 50 children in care right now, but the number fluctuates as new arrivals come in and others go into foster homes or adoptive placements," she said. "Conditions in Sierra Leone are among the worst in the world at the moment."

Many of the children staying at the centre are victims of the fallout from a decade-long civil war that ended in 2002 after devastating the country and creating more than 350,000 orphans, according to UN estimates. The AAO provides a safe home and care for orphaned and abandoned children in the area as well as a school to meet their educational needs and those of the surrounding community, plus a medical centre. Thanks to this facility, Grace can receive long-term care and perhaps, more importantly, some heartfelt affection from the AAO staff.

Last week, the Dubai branch of DHL, the international courier service, transported more than 300kg of desperately needed aid from the UAE to the AAO in Freetown. The contents of the shipment - nappies, detergent and baby milk - were donated to the charity's Dubai office by companies and individuals in the emirate to help it care for a recent influx of needy children. Explaining the need for supplies and support from the UAE, Matthew Morgan-Jones, the



Grace Ashley was abandoned by her parents at 20 months. Undated

AAO country director for Dubai, said: "The need for nappies has come from the constant shortage of running water in Freetown. The children's centre has had limited water supplies and with so many children in our care, the water situation makes life very difficult in terms of hygiene and healthcare.

"Sierra Leone has a very limited manufacturing base, so nappies, baby formula and detergents all need to be imported - a process that is becoming increasingly more expensive.

"Through the generosity of Dubai residents, the co-ordination of our volunteers and partnership with DHL, we not only provide for the children in our care but can also reach out and support families in the local community."

Mr Morgan-Jones was referring to families with children such as

Moses, Caleb and Joshua, whose mother was unable to breastfeed. Without the AAO's intervention and support, the three brothers could have died or the family would have been split up.

Ms Wallace said poverty was the key cause for their situation and thousands more families like them. "Poverty and joblessness are rampant," he said. "Things are not greatly improving for the children and many are still being orphaned.

"Sierra Leone has the highest infant and maternal mortality rate in the world and is ranked as the least developed country. The situation for the children is urgent and ongoing."

Anyone wishing to help the AAO can visit www.aadubai.org or contact info@aadubai.org

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