

NIGHTLY RITUAL
After walking miles
over rough terrain
to reach the pro-
tected town of
Gulu, children re-
trieve water from
a nearby pump to
wash themselves
before bedtime.



LONG WALK TO SAFETY

It takes up to two hours on a dirt road to trek from rural outposts to the town of Gulu, Uganda. But every evening, 40,000 strong make the journey. What's surprising isn't just the 16-mile round trip—it's that it is done barefoot. In the dark. By children as young as 3. *Marie Claire* reports on the risky business of being a "night commuter"

BY JAN GOODWIN PHOTOGRAPHED BY EVELYN HOCKSTEIN/POLARIS

EVERY NIGHT, AS the sun sets over the once-lush terrain of northern Uganda, small figures begin to cluster on the dusty road leading into the town of Gulu. Their movements are so subtle that at first it appears to be a mirage; and then, as if some invisible Pied Piper has begun to play, the population steadily swells to a mass of 40,000. Slowly, they grow closer. Tonight, like every other night of their young lives, children—many barely toddlers, most of them barefoot—will walk up to eight miles from their homes in the bush to the nearest town, Gulu, to escape after-dark rebel raids on their villages.

For two decades, northern Uganda has been under attack by the Lord's Resistance Army (LRA). This rebel force originally claimed to be liberating the north from ethnic and economic differences with the southern part of the country. But the LRA has

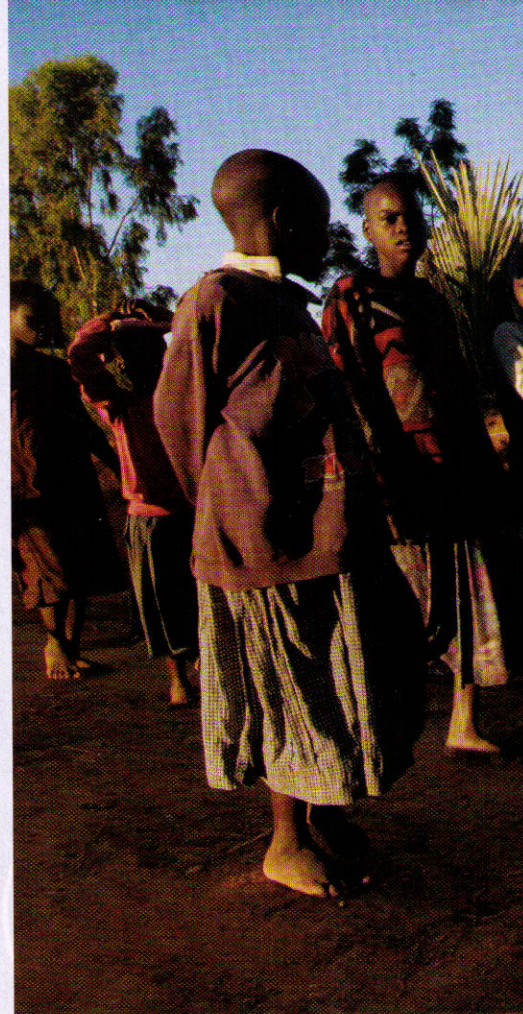
since implemented a campaign of terror against the people of this region. Some 2 million people have been forced from their homes, and an estimated 300,000 have died from violence and war-induced hunger and disease in what is now Africa's longest-running conflict. "In northern Uganda, more people die each week than die in Iraq," says Kathy Relleen, policy adviser for Oxfam GB, an affiliate of the humanitarian-aid group Oxfam International, which has its main office in Uganda's capital city of Kampala. Since 1986, at least 25,000 children have been kidnapped during night raids by the LRA, forced to become sex slaves and child soldiers. It is this terrifying threat of abduction that convinces parents the safest place for their children after dark is anywhere but home.

The phenomenon has arisen mainly because there appears to be no other choice than to have the children seek a safer haven. Ninety percent of the population in the north has already fled the disputed area, and they now

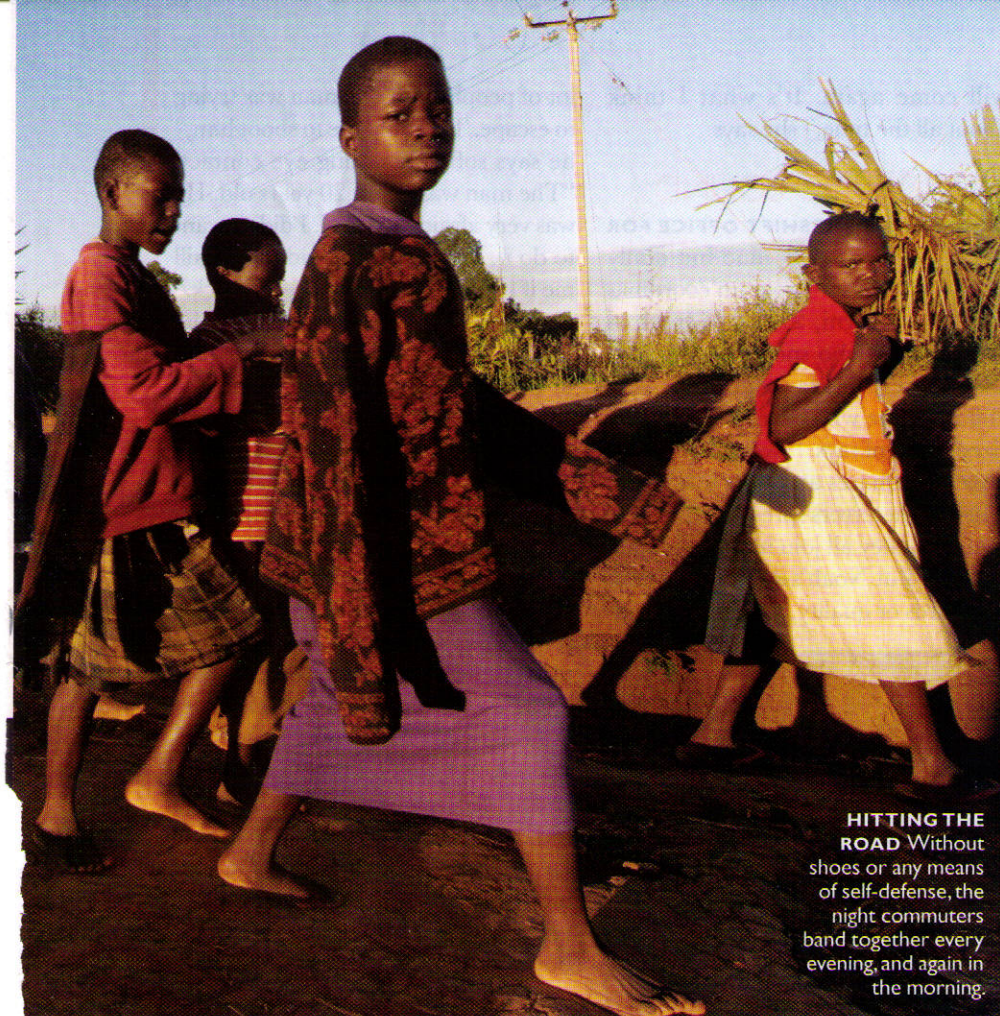
huddle together in overcrowded camps with minimal food rations. Those remaining safeguard their houses and livestock—their only means for survival—with, literally, their lives. Parents who have ventured to join their children on the nightly trip to Gulu return to discover their homes looted and their animals stolen.

So, they send their children on a walk to safety. The "night commuters," as aid workers dub them, make this trek—up to two hours over rough roads—every evening, and again when they return each morning. No one formally organizes them, and it's impossible to discern who's the leader. Once in Gulu, they head to either gated hospital grounds or tented shelters that take them in for the night. As one refuge fills up, the children move on to the next.

Six-year-old Lucy Amiya Akillo is making the lengthy journey without friends or siblings for company. She trudges along barefoot, her head down, as if hoping that if she can't see any dangerous armed strangers, they can't see her either. Dressed in a gray



NO PLACE LIKE HOME Daybreak at Noah's Ark, one of the tented shelters in which children seek refuge.



HITTING THE ROAD Without shoes or any means of self-defense, the night commuters band together every evening, and again in the morning.

skirt and faded red snowflake sweater, she is clearly scared. "My big sister is supposed to be with me," she says in a whisper. "But I was too slow, so she went on ahead. I don't like being alone. The rebels can kill you."

A few hundred yards behind Lucy, three sisters walk hand-in-hand. "We've been walking to Gulu every night since our mother died in the fighting two years ago," says Eunice Adong, who at 11 years old has become a surrogate mom to her younger sisters Lilly, 6, and tiny 3-year-old Jeneth Amena. Eunice and her sisters are off to Lacor Hospital, where they will sleep wherever there is room—often on porches or along concrete pathways—as part of a four-year-old program run by Doctors Without Borders. The hospital, which began providing refuge for the night commuters about 10 years ago, has witnessed barbaric human-rights abuses by the LRA, including the amputation of children's hands, feet, ears, noses, and lips.

Bringing up the rear of the pack is Acii Akello, 6. Acii is headed for

a tented shelter in the center of town. A tattered piece of blanket trails behind him, which he will wrap himself in tonight—his only bed. As Acii walks, he dips one hand into a small square of plastic that he carries in his other, then sucks his fingers clean. The pouch contains Unimix, a fortified corn-soy blend handed out by the World Food Program to malnourished children. (The WFP provides food aid through feeding centers and programs.) Though the powdery mix is normally cooked into a nutritious porridge, Acii eats it raw, the one meal he will receive today. Like many children in northern Uganda, the boy has lost both of his parents in the conflict. "I have very big brothers, and they sleep in our hut, so there is no room for me," he says.

Acii, barely three feet tall, joins a crowd of kids clutching little bundles inside Noah's Ark Children's Ministry, a makeshift camp founded in 2003 by church ministries and volunteers out of concern for the safety of the children who flood into the city each night. Like

other centers for the night commuters, Noah's Ark receives some assistance from aid organizations, but the money is not enough to operate 24/7.

Inside Noah's Ark, large khaki tents donated by UNICEF sit atop what was once waste ground. The tents are faded and battered from years of exposure to the intense African sun, torrential monsoon rains, and housing up to 7000 child boarders every night. Rags tie torn tent flaps closed in an effort to keep out the malarial mosquitoes that torment the children each night. The only substantial structure in the compound looks like an abandoned warehouse, where dozens of road-weary children sleep cheek by jowl under the faint light of a sole candle.

PERILS OF STAYING BEHIND

SINCE NOAH'S ARK OPENED, PAMELA Acen, 14, has slept at the center every night except one. That one night, she nearly lost her life. Speaking in halting English, Pamela describes the nightmare of every child in the center: "I was captured by rebels in December 2003, when I was 11. The evening the LRA took me, I was too sick with a fever from malaria to make the long walk to Gulu," she says. "I was asleep when the rebels entered our hut and began to loot it. There were seven of them. They told me to go with them." Plucking nervously at her sweater, she recounts how the rebels made her walk to the Sudan border, some 50 miles north. (The Sudanese government has long supplied weapons to the LRA, and between battles, the LRA usually retreats to Sudan.) "I had to carry a sack of bullets; it was very heavy," she says. "My feet were bleeding. They only allowed me to drink water once a day. They fed >>

» me at night, but only raw cassava [a root vegetable similar to yam].”

The LRA gave Pamela to a man she knew only as Opie, who, at 32, was nearly three times her age. “He trained me as a soldier, how to shoot a gun. He made me cook for him and heat his water so he could bathe. The slightest mistake, and he would beat me with a stick,” she says. “At night, I had to sleep with him, even though I was still a small child. Some of the other girls got pregnant. I was afraid all the time it would happen to me. Always, I was thinking about escape.”

Nine months later, in October 2004, Opie sent Pamela to fetch water,

will come again. It’s what I think about all the time,” she says.


HOMeward BOUND

INSIDE THE MAKESHIFT OFFICE FOR Noah’s Ark—a small, mud hut dimly lit by an oil lamp—program coordinator Annet Kurni, 27, keeps track of the children who spend the night at the center. “Pamela is one of so many children here who have been traumatized,” Kurni says. “Every night, they have nightmares and start to scream. Their night terrors spread from tent to tent until they all join in. It is dreadful to hear. But Noah’s Ark is not about standards or quality, it’s about provid-

lot of people, and one man was trying to escape. They told me to shoot him,” he says softly, avoiding eye contact. “The man was about 20 years old. He was very afraid. So was I. I didn’t want to do it. But the rebels said they’d kill me if I didn’t. So I shot him. I felt sick.” Geoffrey says he did not know the man he killed. “But I always see him in my dreams—the look on his face when I killed him.”

Six miles later, Geoffrey arrives at his home outside Gulu. The village of 30 round mud huts where he lives is a vision of rustic tranquillity: flowering yellow acacia, tiny plots of cabbage, eggplants and green vegetables. A small rooting pig, a duck, and two cats complete the picture. His mother, Rose Ayaa, is returning from fetching water as he arrives. “After Geoffrey was abducted, I thought I’d never see him again,” she says. “I cried a lot. I tried to forget him. I told myself that only God has power. So I didn’t believe it, four months ago, when someone from the rescue center told me they’d found my boy. I went straight away. I couldn’t speak, I just held him. I made him sleep in Gulu from that first day back.”

While the international community acknowledges the situation in Uganda (last October, the International Criminal Court in the Hague issued an arrest warrant for Joseph Kony, head of the LRA, for crimes against humanity), the U.N. Security Council has to date taken only very tentative steps to begin addressing the situation. “The Security Council must put the crisis in northern Uganda on its agenda. Children are paying for the U.N.’s inaction with their lives,” says Oxfam International spokesman Greg Puley. “So far, not one single resolution has been passed by the Security Council.”

In the meantime, life remains a struggle for Uganda’s littlest residents. As the sun begins to sink each night, thousands of children, like Lucy and Acii, prepare for the long walk. Seven-year-old Unis, almost swallowed up in her hand-me-down parka, says, “When it gets dark, I know we must start our travels to Gulu. I am afraid to walk, but I am more afraid to stay home. The rebels will shoot me. At least this way, I have a chance.” 

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—Geoffrey Okello, 13



and she got her opportunity to escape. When no one was looking, she hid in the bush, then slowly made her way from the rebel encampment. “Eventually, I found Ugandan army barracks,” she says. “They helped me get home. I’ve been coming to Noah’s Ark every night since.”

A lack of medical services means that Pamela, like other abductees, has never been tested for HIV, even though the rebels have a high rate of infection. The trauma of her captivity has left her with what appears to be post-traumatic stress syndrome. “When I’m walking to the center, I am always afraid the rebels will catch me. When I’m at home, I expect they

ing a secure place so the children can sleep safely and get home alive.”

At dawn the kids rise, tumbling out of their tents. By 6:30 a.m., they start the long trek home on empty stomachs. Geoffrey Okello, 13, readies himself for the walk. In his bright T-shirt, red shorts, and red-plastic thong sandals, he could be a kid anywhere. But Geoffrey isn’t any child: He is a trained killer. He was abducted during a raid on his home three-and-a-half years ago, when he was a fourth-grader. His is one of the happier stories, as the Ugandan army rescued him several months ago.

“The rebels taught me how to use a gun. They said we had to attack a village. In the fighting, the LRA killed a