Standing on the edge of this northern Uganda town, one will see flocks of children walking against the quickly setting sun. Carrying siblings and sleeping mats they walk up to 15 kilometers to escape nightmares that could easily become reality. LRA trained recruits in using landmines.

(25.08.2005)
The Lord's Resistance Army (LRA), a rebel group, has roamed northern Uganda for 19 years, abducting thousands of children and killing and mutilating adults. More than 40,000 children leave the countryside every night to sleep in the safer town centers.

These events have deep historical roots dating back further than most Ugandans seem capable of remembering. Says James, an 11-year-old: "I don't remember a time when there was no rebels. I don't even know when this war started. I don't know when this war will stop."

The rebels initially had some support among their own people, the Acholi, a northern tribe that has dangled between being an amalgamated and a disadvantaged lot depending on who held power. Nevertheless, LRA leader Joseph Kony has now turned against his own people and proclaims his direct communication with Christian saints and angels as shepherds of his acts. Mr. Kony intends to eradicate all evil, including the Acholi people and the Ugandan government under Yoweri Museveni.

The LRA has been referred to as one of the world's most brutal guerrilla movements. About 80% of the rebel group consists of children who have been abducted from their homes. The number of people who have been mutilated or killed is unknown, but the atrocities are so abundant that 1.6 million people have deserted their villages. They now live in congested camps protected by government soldiers.

More than 40,000 children leave home every evening. Roads leading from the countryside to town swarm with children running away. They sleep in parking lots, shop verandas, churches, schools, hospital grounds.

Florance is 17 years old; she sits on the veranda, which during the day belongs to a hairdresser. It is evening now and the salon is closed. Florance wraps the blanket tight around her shoulders and looks into the darkness: "Do you know that they kill civilians, innocent civilians who've done nothing wrong?" James, the 11-year-old, sits next to her. He joins in: "The rebels have taken my sister and my brother. They've been gone for three years now." He looks down. "They killed my parents. Now my uncle takes care of me but I'm afraid to sleep in the village where we live. I come into town every night because it's more safe, but even here I'm afraid." He draws circles on the veranda floor with his finger. "I still have hope that my sister and my brother will return one day."

Nine-year-old Vicky had fallen asleep on her cardboard mattress. Our conversation has woken her and she peeks from under her blanket: "You'll recognize the rebels by their machetes. And they're dirty, their uniforms are torn and their hair is undone. Most of them are boys and girls, children just like us."

It is difficult to tell the exact number of LRA rebels, but the United Nations' estimate is between 500 and 600. Mr. Kony leads his troops via solar-powered radios. Under his canon is a line of commanders, many of them as notoriously ruthless as he. The rebels move by foot in smaller units through the endless bush bordering Sudan, feeding themselves by raiding villages and camps for everything from chickens to firewood. Adults are usually mutilated and left behind to scare others into silence; while children down to the age of two are abducted. Official statistics suggest that 20,000 children have been abducted during the conflict, but many cases of abduction are never reported out of fear for revenge. Thousands of children have managed to escape out of captivity while thousands have succumbed to the harsh realities of life in the bush.

"Betsy was abducted by the rebels, ask her," whispers Vicky from under her blanket. In a corner of the veranda sits a girl sewing a button onto a dress. The children call out her name. Betty, now 18, tells her story with great carefulness: "I was 9 years old. It was an early evening. My parents and I were on our way to my grandmother's village. On our way the rebels surprised us. They ordered my parents to continue on their own and then they tied my hands to my back connecting me to a long rope of other children. I was shaking. We walked and walked for days till we reached Sudan. We were in Sudan for six months where they trained us to become soldiers.

"The days were the worst. We had to show our sturdiness. If we resisted we were beaten and in the worst cases killed. At least at nighttime we could relax a little. After six months they gave me my own gun and told me to go into the field. I had to come back with a UPDF (Ugandan People's Defense Force, or government soldiers) uniform. It was horrible. I had never killed before."

The LRA's main bases have been located in southern Sudan for several years. This was where new recruits were trained in using landmines, making bombs and killing in the most gruesome ways possible.

For many years the Sudanese government supported the LRA morally and financially. The Ugandan government, on the other hand, supported the southern Sudanese rebel group, the Sudan People's Liberation Army. In 1999 a peace agreement was established between the two governments and in March 2002, the Ugandan government embarked on Operation Iron Fist, sending 10,000 soldiers in northern Uganda and southern Sudan to combat the rebels. Mr. Kony responded by intensifying mutilations, killings and abductions.

Two-thirds of the people in northern Uganda have left their villages fearing LRA attacks and now live in camps. As a result the countryside is tenantless and fields lie fallow. Few dare to travel to tend their fields; the ones who do live with the fear of never coming back. About 1.5 million northern Ugandans survive on the monthly food rations delivered by the World Food Program.

Although the camps are protected by government soldiers, the LRA still manages to penetrate them and continue the horrors. Parents send their children off to town to spend the night hoping they will be safer. And so far the rebels have refrained from attacking urban areas. "When our parents were children, they didn't sleep on verandas. We have become veranda children. This is not a proper way of life," says Samuel, who is 14 years old. He shares the space on a veranda with the 15 other children. "We pray that the UPDF will protect us should the rebels cross the town boundaries... A year and a half ago the rebels attacked our camp. They took me, my parents and other people from the camp. After a few days they killed my parents. I didn't see them get killed. I closed my eyes." Samuel turns his head, his eyes flickering: "The worst thing is all the killings. It is so brutal. Your commander will force you to kill; if you don't, he'll beat you or even kill you. I witnessed some of my friends being buried alive. It took four years before I got the opportunity to escape."

The creaking fluorescent tube in the ceiling is now turned off. Those who were doing tomorrow's homework have joined the little circle of narrating children. Not a sound is heard. "I was forced to kill on several occasions. Every so often people would be brought before me and I was forced to kill them either using a knife stabbing them to death or I'd have to strangle them."

"What was the worst moment?" a voice asks in the dark. No one says anything. There is just the sound of coughing and fiddling with blankets. After a while Betty breaks the silence: "I was forced to kill on several occasions. Every so often people would be brought before me and I was forced to kill them either using a knife stabbing them to death or I'd have to strangle them."

"Once I had to kill my friend. I had become good friends with one of the other girls. We lived together. It's dangerous when your commanders catch the scent of you being close friends with someone. They think you're collaborating so a plot or that you're planning to escape. I had heard you were close to..."
scent of you being close friends with someone. They think you’re colluding on a plot or that you’re planning to escape. My friend was very close to me, an outspoken girl. They thought that she was influencing me in a bad way and they forced me to kill her. The commander made her lie down and he gave me a big lock and told me to hit her head till she died.”

The rain drums against the corrugated roof of the veranda. The rain came late this year. The heavy drops are good for crops, but with the rain come the rebels. During the rainy season the bush is overgrown and it becomes easy for the LRA to operate out of sight. James clears his throat and asks with a voice of great authority: “The rebels are killing us as if we were flies. I want to ask the Ugandan government: Is this war coming to an end?”

Most of the children on the veranda have fallen asleep by now. With the blankets covering every bit from head to toe they appear as bundled molehills. I get up, put the notebook in my bag, and walk into the dark night. Vicky’s little voice follows me: “Tell the children in your country that if they should come to visit one day, I’d promise to show them how to run if the rebels come. They wouldn’t have to wait for their mom. We would just pick up our clothes and run. I’m a fast runner.”