Gulu at night is the antithesis of a ghost town. Dusty and laid back during the day, the town fills up at night with thousands of little children seeking shelter from abduction in the countryside. Worried parents send their “night commuters,” as they are known here, knowing that children are the preferred target of the Lord’s Resistance Army (LRA). The LRA deliberately target children for abduction to serve as fighter or wives for their rag tag army. By forcing a child to conduct an atrocity on their home community, the LRA are able to ensure the loyalty of the child who thus have nowhere else to go.

The LRA is one of the most fearsome groups of fighters on the entire continent. Although not as well known as other rebel movements, they gained notoriety for using mutilations and child soldiers to sow terror in Northern Uganda for close to two decades now. Gulu, the largest town in Acholi District was once the center of a dynamic agricultural society that has been destroyed by fighting between the LRA and the Ugandan Army. Today Gulu exists on handouts from the omnipresent NGO community operating in Northern Uganda, a particularly harsh blow to the Acholi people who live in the area and who have long prided themselves on their autonomy and self-reliance. Japanese S.U.V.’s ferrying foreign NGO workers and heavily armed government fighters compete for road space with a local population for whom a bicycle remains a luxury.

The conflict in Northern Uganda began at the same moment that saw current President Yoweri Museveni take power in Kampala. For the 10 years prior, Uganda had been ruled by a combination of autocratic military (Idi Amin) and civilian rule (Milton Obote). The end of Museveni’s war against the government in 1986 gave birth to another. Following his ascendance to power, the new government immediately began a campaign to demobilize the former government soldiers, most of whom originally hailed from the North. Though initially sympathetic to Museveni’s struggle, many northern leaders became disillusioned by the heavy handed tactics that the new government was using, and a certain faction of former commanders launched a new war. Museveni’s army responded with an operation designed to cripple the population who were presumed to be supporting the resistance, whether willingly or not.

This division between north and south reflects historical differences between the various ethnicities in this part of Africa. British colonialism’s strategy of divide and rule created a unified state in which groups competed for resources. The North’s political dominance in the post-colonial era further exacerbated this division. Even today in Kampala, the capital city of Uganda located on the southern edge of the country, people remain remarkably oblivious of the North’s problems, preferring to think of the north as a separate, lawless country. Considering the resources diverted to the war effort, this approach makes little sense, but it is hard to find a Southerner who has even been to the North— only a four hour trip by bus. According to Adam Branch, an American researcher who has studied the issue, “The basic problem is that the North is viewed as politically expendable by the South.”
Although the initial rebellion in the North reflected some of the political issues central to the Acholi and others in this part of the country, by 1988 various factions fighting the government took an unfortunate turn coalescing around a local priestess named Alice Auma. Alice claimed to be possessed by a spirit called “Lakwena,” and promised her fighters that they would be protected by her powers. Alice’s army was soon taken over by a relative named Joseph Kony who also claimed to be a spirit medium, and by the end of 1988, Kony had formed the Lord’s Resistance Army with the stated goal of transforming Northern Uganda into a land ruled by the Ten Commandments. Kony’s army never garnered much support and was forced to rely on increasingly coercive tactics to subdue the population including the cutting off of hands, lips and ears.

Meanwhile, the Ugandan military using counter-insurgency tactics reminiscent of Vietnam-era anti-guerilla operations, attempted to flush out the rebels by forcing—often with horrific violence—the entire population of the area into gigantic camps where they could be more easily managed. According to estimates, some 1.3 million people still live in the camps in appalling conditions with scant protection and little opportunity to make a living. Caught between two evils both accusing the local population of supporting the other, the Acholi have been caught in a Catch-22 for almost 18 years. An entire generation has grown up in these camps and all villages in the region have been abandoned for the relative safety of Gulu or the camps. According to Jara Joseph, a local farmer, veterinarian and human rights activist, “We are the ones who suffered the most, but people still say we support the war.”

People responded to LRA attacks by banding together in informal militia groups known as Local Defence Units (LDU’s). The government, recognizing the value of co-opting the LDU’s have turned them into quasi-official fighters, though they remain woefully underpaid, even compared to the low-paid government soldiers. Even worse, the government’s fears of providing weapons to potential future threats has rendered many of the LDU’s ineffective. Furthermore, while originally based on the principle that LDU fighters would be effective since they organized locally, the government has callously moved around LDU’s away from their home area to places to which they have little connection. Underpaid, yet armed, they too resort to looting the local populations to survive.

Despite the severity of the current situation, a cautious optimism is slowly pervading the air. In local bars and restaurants, the overriding sentiment is that the 18 years of war that has plagued this region may be coming to an end. Developments within Uganda and in neighboring Sudan, where the LRA have long sought refuge, are converging around a potential end to the conflict. The major development has been the peace talks in neighboring Sudan where the forces of the Sudan People’s Liberation Army are engaged in advanced talks with the government in Khartoum that could end the similarly lengthy conflict there. The Sudanese government has come under severe pressure from the American president George Bush for their treatment of the Southern Sudanese. An unlikely (and unholy?) coalition of Christian conservatives and Black political leaders has been placing pressure on Bush to intervene in Sudan to end the supposed persecution of that country’s Black Christian South by the Arab Muslim North. This has led the
Sudanese government to withdraw support for the LRA who are reeling under aggressive Ugandan pressure and the loss of their long time protector. An SPLA commander in Kampala told me that they are waiting to exact revenge on the LRA who have long been a thorn in their side as proxy fighters for the Khartoum regime. He assured me that once the current peace negotiations were over and the cease-fire lifted, the SPLA would finish off the LRA for good.

Combined with revelations in Kampala that high-ranking members of the Ugandan Army have been cheating the government out of millions by falsely reporting the number of soldiers on the front line, a new, more powerful government presence in the region is expected.

But people in Gulu remain cautious about the future. In the words of Martin Komakech who works with Human Rights Focus in Gulu, “We want to be hopeful, but we have our fears.” He points out that Museveni’s regime has spent close to two decades pursuing a military solution, but little has been done to redress the legitimate political grievances of the North. For example, while the government views the LRA as a scourge that must be wiped out, people in the North recognize that many of the fighters are their own children. Until the Museveni regime recognizes the importance of addressing the genuine political concerns of the North, a long-term peace may remain elusive.