

As the smothering blanket of nightfall approaches, a small band of starving teenage boys hides in a basement as a faint light permits them to study with dreams of escaping from their homeland.

The dark dwelling temporarily safeguards against the harsh reality of a society where armed rebels ravage in darkness and steal the innocence of these frail and tender children. The militants they fear are often young enough to be outweighed by the AK-47 assault rifles, but their coerced situation induces a violent grip.

Dubbed “night commuters,” the unseen children reside in the despair of northern Uganda. It is a place where over 20,000 have had their futures ripped away by the merciless tear of the Lord’s Resistance Army over the last two decades, inhumanely forced to serve as guerilla soldiers.

“It is shocking to learn that the abductions have been going on for nearly twenty years and these children have been invisible for so long,” said Nathan Mustain, a third-year student at Loyola.

Twenty years of war have internally displaced the young refugees and their families, as an average of 131 people die each day as a result of the unrestrained violence.

Mustain is the president of the emerging campus organization Invisible Conflicts, which has captured the hearts and minds of Loyola students in the last month by showing the enthralling film “Invisible Children.”

Mustain says screening the documentary, which shows a raw reality of the need for basic human survival, makes the Ugandan children visible by telling their story in a suitable way.

“After being astounded that these (abductions) can actually take place, people want to know how to use what they have learned and we are trying to empower them,” Mustain said.

The exhibition has attracted a wide range of audience members and encouraged increasing activism at Loyola. The reaction to the film has been “amazing,” according to Mustain.

“We are surprised by the diversity of student response,” added Kenneth Sperling, a third-year Philosophy major. “It is the opposite of what was expected and people have really come together.”

Invisible Conflicts has approximately 20 strongly committed members and support has increased exponentially since the first screening on April 6, according to the organization.

“The nature of our culture insulates us from what goes on in the developed world and this film, along with a Jesuit education, fosters a commitment to the children who suffer,” Mustain said.

Tuesday was the final screening of the hidden holocaust in Western Africa. Invisible Conflicts has displayed the film three times in the last month, but the effort to increase awareness does not end with this captivating depiction.

“We want the press, the government and the public to take note as we stand in solidarity with the people of Uganda,” Mustain said. “People cannot provide a solution without the knowledge.”

Along with the screenings and raising money by selling T-shirts, Invisible Conflicts will unite to experience a fragment of the pain felt by thousands of demoralized Ugandan children this Saturday night at Grant Park.

An expected 300 Loyola students and 900 Chicagoans will join nearly 30,000 nationwide in the Global Night Commute by sleeping in the streets to empathize with the “night commuters.” The event is sponsored by the international organization Invisible Children Inc.

For Invisible Conflicts, Mustain says, the gathering in downtown Chicago is the “culmination of students’ efforts who have realized the dreadfulness of the bloody conflict.” Over 1.6 million Ugandans have fled their homes and sought refuge in their own backyard in the midst of warfare.

“Invisible Children” has exposed the brutality to the world. Directed and produced by three college students with no experience or contacts in the Ugandan region, the film has gained popularity across the country.

Recently, an increasing number of Western media reports and recognition by international bodies has emerged.

“It is a huge movement amongst a just-chill MTV generation,” Mustain said. “It really is not your typical social justice crowd.”

Despite the growing awareness, the assistance to Uganda in the international community has remained small.

Jan Egeland, the U.N. Under Secretary General for Humanitarian Affairs, labeled the turmoil as the “largest neglected humanitarian emergency” in the world.

The unconsciousness of a terrorist insurgency movement, 80 percent of which are children guerillas given the choice of killing or being viciously battered and ultimately murdered, is alarming.

Nevertheless, the carnage instills a very high level of emotion in the objectives of Invisible Conflicts along with the purpose of “Invisible Children” and offers a call to action.

“The video is powerful and draws you very close to the conflict,” said Mackenzie Shreve, a freshman Theology and Human Studies major. “It is an opportunity to get involved and work in this mission to combat the crisis.”

The fight continues to provide resources to the children by chronicling their oppression through grassroots awareness. At Loyola, the up-and-coming Invisible Conflicts organization is the heartbeat and hope of northern Ugandan children.

“I could not go on with life as usual after witnessing these unthinkable sufferings,” Mustain said.