

Ugandan conflict motivates students

By Patrick Ygnacio
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Texas State students will gather Saturday in Austin to join thousands of others from across the state in telling the global community to "Displace Me."

Invisible Children Inc. has organized a nationwide event in which participants leave their homes to simulate the lives of nearly two million people displaced because of a longstanding internal conflict in northern Uganda. It is part of a campaign to raise awareness of the conditions at displacement camps in the region.

Participants from 15 U.S. cities will commit to sleeping on the floor of designated sites to demonstrate how people live within the camps. The event in Austin will be held at the Travis County Exposition Center.

"You can't just sympathize and say OK, well I can't do anything — you really can, it's not hard," said Lauren Bazan, Baptist Student Ministry intern. "Invisible Children has already provided plenty of opportunities. They've already done the ground work."

The experiences of three American college students on a trip to Africa were chronicled in the 2006 documentary *Invisible Children*. Much of the film documents the lives of Ugandan children and their nightly commutes away from home to avoid being abducted and forced into military service by the Lord's Resistance Army. Since 1986, the army has waged a rebellion against the Ugandan government as a result of the strictly divided political climate. The insurgency's military force now primarily consists of about 30,000 children who have been abducted from their homes and forced into military slavery, according to the Uganda Conflict

Action Network's Web site.

Bazan said the problems in Uganda have persisted as long as they have because of scant media coverage and little intervention from governments worldwide.

"In America, (the) youth, they are our world, they are huge to us," Bazan said. "And so, if this was happening in our country, you bet the president would be all over that. You bet people would be all over that, but because it's in Africa, people are like, 'Well that's Africa, that's a different place.'"

Nearly two million people have been evicted from their homes by the Ugandan government in an attempt to shield them from the dangers posed by the Lord's Resistance Army. The displaced natives now reside in camps sheltering 10,000 to 60,000 people each. An estimated 1,000 people die per day because of the deprived conditions within these camps.

Since the release of *Invisible Children*, a global movement has been established to raise awareness and to motivate leaders from around the world to encourage a peaceful resolution to the conflict in Uganda.

Upon first learning of the number of people affected, music sophomore Casey Cowan was moved to explore the possibility of participating.

"This whole time I've been sitting here like, 'What can I do?'" Cowan said. "What can I do personally and what can I do in my relationship with God that will help me get the word out and help me just have the courage to step up and doing something about this?"

Bazan, Texas State alumna, said the operation calls for the time and talents of those wanting to get involved.

"It's anything and everything

that your heart desires," Bazan said. "I'm a photography major; I can take pictures, make posters. You can do anything, and they need that creativity. That's the big thing."

Sarah Tarhini, interdisciplinary studies freshman, said the campaign has gained significant success. She said since the release of the documentary, educational programs and mentor services have been established for children affected by the conflict. In 2006, a Global Night Commute was organized in which 80,000 Americans walked to their downtown city districts and slept outside to demonstrate for the cause. Following the event, peace talks were initiated in Uganda and rebel activity began to steadily decline.

"It did bring peace talks, and it did bring a cease fire and it did rally media and governments," Tarhini said. "In fact, it's changed from raising awareness to actually ending the war."

Tarhini said the movement provides an opportunity for young people to make a difference in a time when they are often regarded as indifferent and unresponsive to international issues.

"They say our generation will be remembered for three things," Tarhini said. "The technological advances, September 11 and what we did or did not do for Africa."

★FYI

Anyone interested in learning more about the discords in Uganda or wanting to register for Displace Me can visit the web site www.invisiblechildren.com.