Advisors assure me a three-hour bus ride from Adjumani to Gulu in northern Uganda is a safe way to travel; after all, a year had passed since the last attack on an armed convoy. My goal is to meet up there with Fr. Tony Wach, SJ who wants me to see and photograph the desperate conditions in Gulu and the surrounding area.

Fr. Tony has a dream for this place, a vision that starkly contrasts with the horrors of present reality.

On the summer day after I arrive, Tony celebrates Sunday morning Mass and preaches for about half an hour at the Sacred Heart School for Girls run by the Little Sisters of Mary Immaculate. He then heads for Pabbo, a refugee camp 25 miles north of Gulu where some 67,000 people live in round, thatch-roof clay structures called tukuls in an area no larger than the campus of Creighton or Marquette university.

Justin Ochola, 66, head catechist in Pabbo Catholic parish for 39 years, walks us through the camp. He has 10 children, and gets by on the equivalent of $5 a month along with the 50 kilograms of maize and 25 kilograms of beans, and about a gallon of cooking oil the World Food Program gives each family — all of which usually lasts about two weeks on a diet of one modest meal a day.

As we walk among the tukuls, an elderly woman appears naked to the waist and begging for a dress. "Look at me! I have nothing," she says. "This is how I have to live!" My instinct is to photograph her as she pleads. But I don’t, less I take what’s left of her dignity. My professional colleagues may not have hesitated. And maybe I shouldn’t have. It would have been a powerful photograph as it is indelibly etched in my memory.

Looking back over the photos of the camp, I realize they do not fully convey the awfulness of the living conditions or the deep poverty in which these people suffer.

Even more moving is the scene at a nearby rehabilitation camp operated by the Gulu Support Children’s Organization, a local non-government organization that has repatriated more than 7,000 of the 30,000 children abducted by rebels of the very un-godly Lord’s Resistance Army in the past 19 years. They are stolen to become either child soldiers or sex slaves to the commanders. GUCSO counsels the children and works to welcome them back into society.

It’s hard to imagine what it must take to erase the images of killings and atrocities burned into the memories of these children — boys forced to kill a parent or their own...
brothers; girls taken captive to care for the babies of older girls until they are old enough to have sex and bear the children of their abductors. I photograph two young women, now 25, who had escaped recently after being held captive since they were 12. Each had borne babies sired by LRA commanders.

Florence Akello, a social worker from Kitgum in her mid 20s, works with abducted children. She calls them each by name and treats them with the gentleness they so badly need. Florence explains that several types of children come to GUSCO: those direct from captivity; abducted kids who are problems in their local communities; unaccompanied children whose relatives take six months to a year to find; and girls who are abducted when they are young first to be babysitters, then sex slaves and mothers.

Florence tells us of a woman who just had a baby in a near-by refugee camp. When I hear the story of how this woman was mauled by three LRA rebel soldiers, I asked Florence if we could visit her. We arrive at the camp, about 7 kilometers from Gulu, at about 6 p.m., narrowly avoiding travel near nightfall when it’s dangerous and travel is not recommended.

He thinks the parish could be a start and a base from which to serve the university as campus ministers. He envisions a grade school and, eventually, a secondary school. Since Fr. Opio has a connection with the Archdiocese of St. Paul and Minneapolis, Tony also dreams of forming a bond of support between a parish in Gulu and sister parishes in the Twin Cities.

I leave Gulu inspired by the tremendous zeal and vision Fr. Tony has for Africa and the people of Uganda where, for 16 years, he has lived “on fire” with a desire to serve the people. If there is a neediest among the many groups in Africa, it may well be the 1.5 million internally displaced people surrounding Gulu in Northern Uganda. Given Fr. Tony’s irrepressible passion, his dream may well come true.

Story ender: to help Fr. Tony Wach, SJ make his dream reality for the people of Gulu, contact The Jesuit Partnership at (800) 537.3736. E-mail: partnership@jesuitswisprov.org.

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