“We are approaching Karuma falls” my driver said in his heavily accented Ugandan English, as much a legacy of the British as the elegant dresses worn by the old women as they work bent over in their fields. After only two weeks in the country I was finding it strange speaking English in Africa – perhaps a vestige from my time in Congo and Chad. We drove carefully around the bend in the road and my heart skipped a beat, again remembering Congo – soldiers. To the right hand side of the white Toyota land cruiser was a large UPDF military base. We gingerly passed the base and drove to the foot of the bridge, smiling and waving at the soldiers. I lifted my camera for a picture of my first view of the Nile. “Don’t do that” my driver said, pointing at the well-armed military men wearing sunglasses leaning against the rusted metal of the bridge. Even after more than a year of relative peace, the UPDF were still very much on alert. I quickly put down my camera, instead looking intently at the falls, as I often do when trying to engrave an image into my memory.

During the 23 years of the Lords Resistance Army’s (LRA) insurgency, Karuma falls marked the historic and geographic boundary between south and north, between Bantu and Luo, between peace and war. During the decades of violence, vehicles wanting to make the one hour drive from Karuma to Gulu, the capital of northern Uganda, would have to wait at the bridge to assemble a large enough convoy for an escort. Then, UPDF military mounted on their characteristic Mambas would take them north. Even with the added protection, often times the convoys were attacked by roving
bands of the LRA’s infamous child soldiers. As I drove to Gulu, in February of 2008, more than a year after the last shot was fired, there was still little movement on the road and the crowded camps surrounding trading centers were still packed with masses of helpless humanity.

But that was then. Two and a half years later I am taking the same road, as I prepare my goodbyes to this beautiful but still fragile country and its resilient people. The road is now completed, cutting the drive time from Kampala in half. As I careen over Karuma falls my driver dodges thousands of people of all ages carrying everything from school books to chickens. Sometimes a slow moving lorry impedes our progress, laden heavy with construction materials for the boom town of Gulu. As we slow I gaze at the former camps, surveying with satisfaction the little piles of rubble in the thousands where round tukuls used to be the makeshift homes of over 90% of the population.

Reflecting on the change, I couldn’t help thinking about what came in between – thirty months of some of the hardest but most satisfying work of my life. For the past two and a half years I have been the Country Representative for USAID’s Office of Transition Initiatives. This office, running the Northern Uganda Transition Initiative, is the US Mission to Uganda’s flagship post-conflict transition and stabilization program. With $22,000,000 programmed through over two hundred and fifty small, in-kind grants
– working through local government, local cultural leaders and local civil society groups reaching directly over 150,000 people – we have “greased” the return process. Through thousands of grass roots meetings, hundreds of inaugurations, countless hours of radio airtime – and some unwelcome bumps along the way, we did our small part to help usher in an increasingly prescient peace. Projects like clinics, schools, local government offices, and markets have shown the Acholi people the elusive peace dividend and built their confidence in their government. Radio soap operas, public service announcements, concerts in return areas, dance and sporting events, videos on the peace process and support to independent radio have satiated the hunger of a people desperate for information. Finally, cleansing and reburial ceremonies for human remains found un-attended, “Wang Oo” fireside chats, and peace forums have helped heal some of the most urgent wounds of a war fought between brothers, children and families.

And the peace is holding.

The Peace, Recovery and Development Plan, so long delayed, has finally taken off with almost $500,000,000 from not only the donors but the Government of

USAID/OTI Country Representative Joel Hirst walks through the bush to a re-burial ceremony in Amuru District

In Lira Palwo sub-county, Pader District the local residents hold a cultural gala where they celebrate their traditions along with their cultural and elected leaders.
Uganda itself. As I write this, a NUTI funded survey by the University of Berkley has discovered that 95% of respondents no longer categorize themselves as displaced. On the ground, over 80% of the displaced population has returned home. Schools are back to their original locations, local government is planning and organizing, people are farming and harvesting, and the terrible dark night of camp life has led at long last to a new dawn. What Jan Egeland called “the world’s worst forgotten humanitarian crisis” is over.

Yet while the picture is unequivocally improved, there are still many clouds on the horizon for northern Uganda, and Uganda as a whole. A contentious presidential election is pitting three candidates, two from the north, against an increasingly entrenched establishment. Already there are signs that the process won’t be as free and fair as we would hope, and President Museveni’s 25 year hold on power seems now a liability for lasting peace. Also, stemming from the center outward, the corruption that has always plagued Africa has sullied the confidence of ordinary Ugandans and the international community in a Government of Uganda that is a transparent partner for positive social change. And with the discovery of oil, there is fear that the already historic levels of graft will only grow. And finally, we must not forget the ongoing plight of the Congolese. With the LRA’s continued activity there, that downtrodden country is poised to extend and deepen the already deplorable situation of its citizens as it plays host to yet another vicious rebel movement.
“We are there” my driver says, waking me from my private reverie. My last visit to Gulu town is bitter-sweet, as are all goodbyes. *At least this time*, I say to myself in consolation, *the situation is firmly in the hands of Ugandans*. The future of the Pearl of Africa, with its beautiful game parks, its lakes and rivers, its jungles and savannas, and its colorful people can perhaps now, more than at any time in history, be decided by domestic debate in relative peace and stability.