

Sweden's African wars

"Sweden finances wars in Africa," says a new book by a Swedish journalist and writer, Bengt Nilsson. Like a bomb blast, the book, published in September 2008, unveils how Swedish aid is diverted to fund wars in Africa. **Moussa Awuonda** reports from Stockholm.

Whenever the controversial role of Western aid to Africa is debated, there is always a tendency to make an exception for a set of donors. The Nordic countries, namely Sweden, Norway, Denmark and Finland, belong to a league of countries whose aid policies and practice in Africa are often lauded. Their aid budgets normally reach the 0.7% of the target earmarked by the UN. Indeed, some of the Nordic countries exceed this by allocating 1% of their gross national product (GNP) to help developing countries, mostly in Africa.

Governments receiving Scandinavian aid talk of the lack of "strings attached". "The Nordic countries are true friends of the African people," said Nelson Mandela in Stockholm soon after his release from detention in 1991. As the Swedish scholar Susan Holmsberg notes: "Sweden's development assistance can be conceptualised as one component of the international extension of its domestic welfare system." Therefore, in tropical Africa, Swedish aid workers go about as experts in planting trees, building schools, hospitals, water pipes and roads – social amenities and political institutions that partly turned Sweden, once a poor country, into a modern state rising out of extreme deprivation and inequality among the classes. Nearly a third of Sweden's population migrated to the USA in the 19th century to escape hunger and persecution. Although Sweden has a weapons manufacturer called Bofors, it is unheard of for military procurement to be part of Swedish aid packages to Africa. Other European donors,

especially such former colonial masters as Britain and France, have military interests and pacts that are paid through aid. Owing to the favourable popular image of Sweden, it therefore came as a bomb blast when a book titled *Sweden's African Wars* was launched in Stockholm in September 2008, authored by the Swedish journalist and writer, Bengt Nilsson. The 303-page book was published by Timbro, a think-tank based in Stockholm. Can it be true?

Many were sceptical and suspected that the book, with a provocative title, could merely be an alarmist stunt by those opposed to Swedish aid; if so it was the season to bash up the Swedish aid agency, Sida, by the centre-right coalition in power as it prepared to take up European Union presidency in 2009. Surprisingly, the book has kept its promise and the author has persuasive arguments and credible evidence on which to base his verdict. The book's main premise is that wars are costly and every war must have its sponsors who pay the soldiers and buy weapons, mostly imported. In other words, who pays for African wars and by what means?

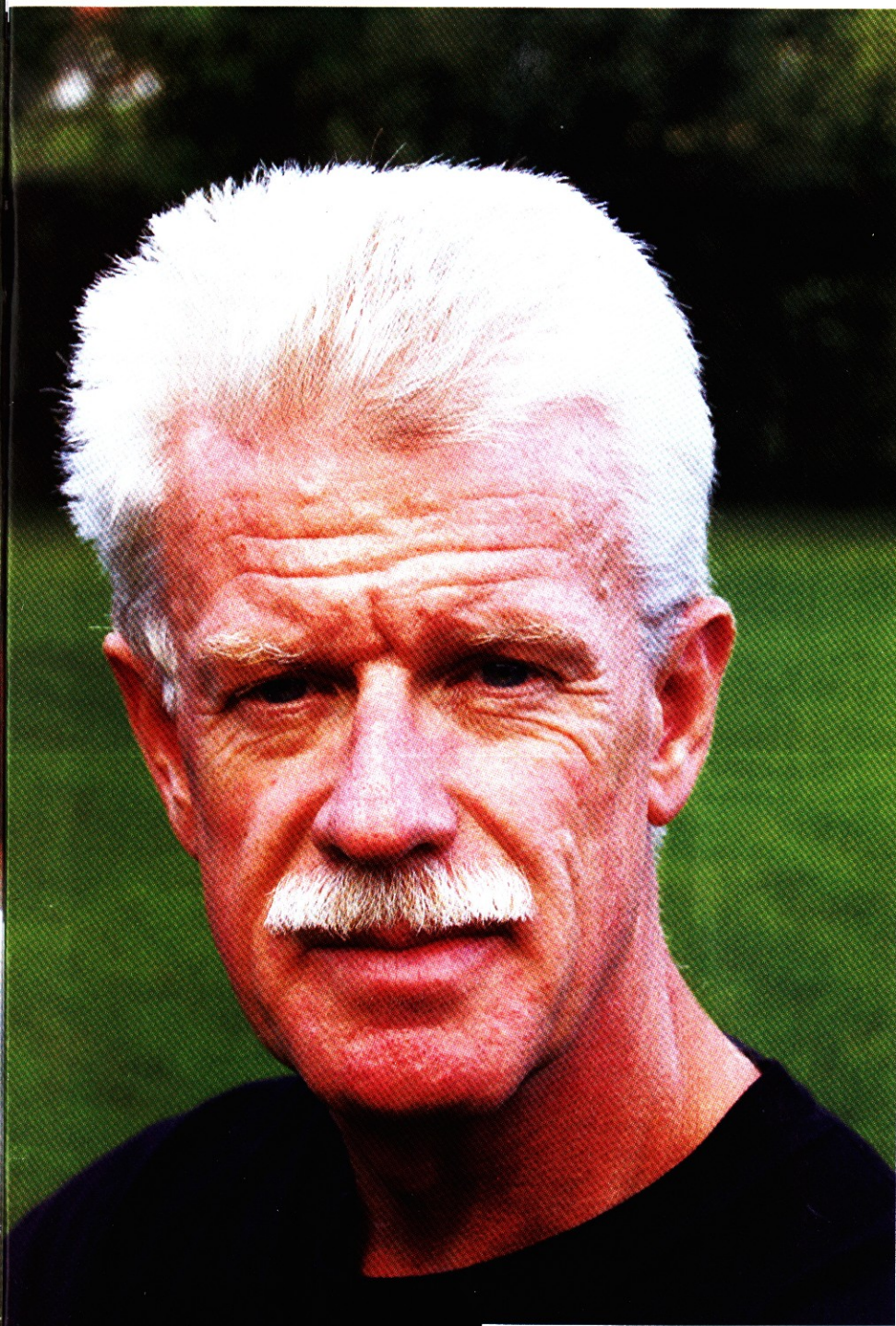
Nilsson went about providing the answers from what other experts themselves say. He met official aid workers, NGOs, rebels, government troops, and the casualties of wars on the ground, who are either starving, dying, ill or fleeing. Countries put under the spotlight are Angola, Ethiopia, Liberia, Mozambique, Uganda, Sudan, Zimbabwe and Sudan. The book covers over 30 years of Swedish aid in Africa.

Quoting from studies done by the British international NGO, Oxfam, and an economist, Paul Collier, the book high-

The author, Bengt Nilsson, accuses his own country, Sweden, of deliberately turning a blind eye when Sweden's aid was diverted into Uganda's war campaign by Museveni's government

lights the fact that aid transfers have for a long time provided a lucrative market for astute political leaders and guerilla movements in Africa. According to a study done on the period 1990-2005, in those years Africa received a total of US\$300bn in development assistance, and about 40% of this was diverted to military spending. Swedish aid has been so diverted by means of two systems. One, through budgetary support. Two, through "fungibility", the aid syndrome that makes sure that an astute government hands over its responsibility to donors, rather like an irresponsible father whose family is taken care of by the society. A case in point is when rural clinics in Uganda were closed down at the same time that Uganda, receiving Swedish money, was waging wars abroad and sustaining the conflict with the Lord's Resistance Army (LRA) in the north – a war that has dislocated over one million people. Without mincing his words, Reagan Okumu, a member of Uganda's parliament, says: "Budgetary support from Sweden financed these wars."

Nilsson's exposé begins with the Ethiopian military government after the overthrow of Emperor Haile Selassie in 1974. It is natural that his probing starts with Ethiopia, which, with India, was among the first countries to get "overseas development assistance" (ODA). Obsession with Ethiopia was strong among Swedish church organisations, mainly



those doing voluntary work. Ethiopia had become famous with the Swedish public after the Emperor's army defeated an invasion by the fascist Italian regime under Benito Mussolini during the Second World War. The Swedish millionaire, philanthropist and aviation expert, Carl Gustav von Rosen, helped build Ethiopia's air force and found one of Africa's oldest commercial airlines.

Although an ally of America, when Mengistu Haile Mariam grabbed power, Ethiopia soon changed sides and entered the Soviet Union's orbit, after the regime's request for arms was turned down by the US. Mengistu declared the country a Marxist-Leninist state and launched an ambitious land reform project. At the same time, he began a war against neighbouring Somalia, now backed by the US. The military junta was also fighting against Oromo, Tigray and Eritrean liberation movements seeking their own independence. Short of cash in foreign currency, the young Soviet satellite state turned to the coffers of the Swedish aid agency, Sida. In one instance, it claimed to "borrow" the aid! The trucks donated by Sweden were openly used for war purposes.

Stefan de Vylder, a Sida official in charge of Ethiopia, was disturbed by the

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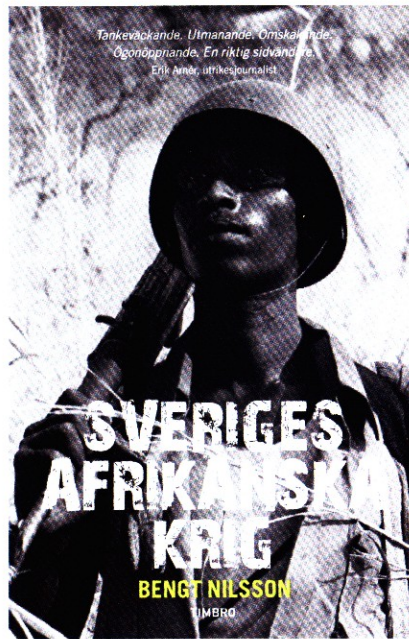
abuses of Swedish aid. In his reports, De Vylder alerted Sida's headquarters in Stockholm. He expected that the government of the day would make objections to the use of taxpayers' money to support armed conflicts conflicting with the goals of aid sanctioned by the Swedish parliament.

De Vylder's memos were met with silence. The whistleblower was finally forced to flee Ethiopia. He abandoned his job amidst threats from Ethiopian so-called revolutionaries and vigilantes who included Swedes as well! When he returned to Stockholm, De Vylder was horrified to see his report highlighting Ethiopian atrocities distorted by Sida's chiefs, so that the Swedish parliament could allocate new aid replenishments to a regime that had begun to eat its own children. Frustrated and demoralised, De Vylder was just one such example of a sacrificial lamb. Another Swedish aid worker died mysteriously in Addis Abba. Until 2007, Sida continued to turn a blind eye to the abuses of its aid by the government of Ethiopia. Ethiopian forces are still in Somalia as we write.

But it is in the case of Uganda that Sida's dancing with wolves seems to annoy the author most, partly because of the charm offensive President Yoweri Museveni put up to win over the Swedes. Ever since Julius Nyerere of Tanzania, there has not been an African leader with such charm when it comes to dazzling and courting the Nordic countries. For instance, Museveni met the then Swedish prime minister, Ingvar Carlsson, during a 1996 tour of Stockholm. There were protesters outside and yet Museveni – sharing a press conference table with Carlsson – went about boasting of the controversial “No-Party Democracy” in Uganda. Rather than voicing his concerns, the Swedish leader's sense of humour was tickled and he burst out laughing!

According to Nilsson, Museveni's “No-Party Democracy”, civil war in northern Uganda, and the military campaign in DR Congo have all been financed by Sweden's taxpayers. Of the Western donors, Sweden gives a large chunk: 50% of Uganda's budget is aid money. Drawing on three sources, Nilsson explains how Sweden, through Sida, has been an accomplice to Museveni's wars.

Julian Kippenberg, of US-based Human Rights Watch, is quoted as say-



The front cover of Bengt Nilsson's controversial book, *Sweden's African Wars*

important juncture in Swedish-African relations. Sweden's centre-right coalition is headed by a prime minister who has displayed no interest in Africa. Unlike his predecessors, Frederick Reinfeldt has not even visited Africa since winning the elections two years ago. Moreover, the centre-right parties in Sweden have traditionally held the view that aid should be tied to Swedish goods. They were never strong proponents of the UN goal of 0.7% of GDP going to international aid. Some people in those parties have suggested scrapping Sida altogether and replacing Swedish aid with trade opportunities for African countries.

Sweden's current foreign minister, Carl Bildt, was never keen on building stronger ties with African leaders when he was prime minister over 10 years ago. The book seems to suggest that Swedish aid to Africa may undergo radical changes for both good and bad. In this respect, aid minister Gunilla Carlsson's words and movements are important to watch. Her press aide, Peter Larsson, told *New African*: “Some of the book's findings are important for improving the performance of Swedish aid. There are likely to be radical changes in the way Sida works, which is to fight poverty.” Although drawing mixed reactions from Sida, many voices in the Left Party and the Social Democratic Party, which was in power for the many years of Sida's bungling, agree that the book “has helped stir up public debate about what Sida does abroad.” Hans Linde, a spokesperson for the Left Party, said: “We need a strong debate, but unfortunately the public is not well informed about aid issues. Sometimes I blame Swedish parliamentarians. They are lazy and don't read the reports.” Linde made beef of the fact that the book was published by a conservative think-tank. “Its charges are less neutral and ideologically driven,” he noted. When and if Timbro translates the book into English or French, a wider public in Africa will be able to judge for themselves the changing role of Swedish aid workers. Apart from occasional carelessness with African names, the book reads with the thrill of a travelogue, yet retains the serious substance of Africa's plight amid wars and their paymasters. ■NA

ing: “Sweden is a big donor and supports Uganda politically. Therefore, it has to be blamed if it sees that the government commits repression [in the north].”

In Gulu, where the Ugandan government troops have been fighting the LRA, the author encountered the Ugandan MP, Reagan Okumu. “Swedish budgetary support finances these wars,” Okumu said matter-of-factly. He argues that there is no way in which a donor country can prevent its funds being misdirected by cunning recipient governments since all the resources are pooled together. Surprisingly enough, Sida's official responsible for Uganda, Per Karlsson, concurs with the author that the system of budgetary support is, in effect, a vote of confidence in the government. “Budgetary support is like giving one *carte blanche* or blank cheque,” the book says. “The government in power will always use the money as they wish. There is nothing to stop them putting the money to bad use.”

A Ugandan political refugee, who had worked in the Ugandan army, agrees: “As someone who served in the army, I saw the direct connections between aid and war. Without donor backing, Uganda couldn't wage those wars. Now we have to pay the hefty fines to the International Court in the Hague for invading DR Congo,” says Col. Samson Mande, who attended the book's launch and discussions.

Sweden's African Wars comes at an