

Northern Flank by Göran Haglund

The Swedish-Angolan hostage crisis

Two Swedes who were captured by UNITA guerrillas have been released—no thanks to the Swedish government.

Two Swedish aid workers who were captured on Sept. 6 by the pro-Western UNITA guerrillas in Angola were released on Dec. 2, after a diplomatic crisis that was unnecessarily prolonged by the Swedish government. It would appear that Stockholm was more concerned to please its friends in Havana, Cuba than to safely and swiftly bring its own citizens back home. All in all, it cast Sweden's policy toward Angola in a revealing light.

On Sept. 5, in a region northeast of the Angolan capital of Luanda, an electrification project recently completed by Swedish companies with the financial aid of the Swedish government was inaugurated by Minister of International Aid Lena Hjelm-Walén. One day later, a truck convoy escorted by Angolan government troops, en route from the inauguration site to Luanda, was attacked and captured by UNITA guerrillas. Three Swedish aid workers were captured.

While one of the three Swedes died shortly afterward of bullet wounds—whose bullets is not clear—the two others were taken for a long, two-month march toward Jamba, the UNITA capital located in Angola's south. Meanwhile, diplomatic maneuvering began as to what would happen to the two Swedes once they arrived in Jamba.

The Swedish government refused any direct negotiation with UNITA, as this would have been an insult to the Angolan one-party dictatorship of the Movement for the Popular Liberation of Angola (MPLA), and inconsistent with Sweden's longstanding "best friends" relationship with Fidel Castro. Some 25,000 Cuban troops are

fighting in Angola, to prop up the MPLA, aided by a few thousand "advisers" from Russia and East Germany.

Using the opportunity of Premier Ingvar Carlsson's September visit to the United States, President Reagan and the State Department were asked to make their influence with UNITA felt in support of an early release of the two Swedes. Along with South Africa, the United States is the chief backer of UNITA. Other mediation efforts ran through Lisbon, Portugal, the former colonial power which was forced out of Angola in 1975.

Operating throughout Angola, a country three times the size of California but with only one-third its population, UNITA in recent years has captured many foreigners, and generally released them within a few weeks. Among other reasons, this has been meant to demonstrate the absolute inability of the MPLA to control the country, in spite of massive Cuban and Russian backing, and to force some of the countries involved into diplomatic contact with UNITA.

Indicating UNITA's attitude toward the U.S. intervention on behalf of Sweden, UNITA leader Jonas Savimbi issued an Oct. 18 declaration through his Lisbon office, stating, "None of UNITA's allies is in a position to tell us what to do." He said that the Swedes were going to be released, if Sweden withdrew its support for the MPLA, stopped calling UNITA troops "terrorists," and negotiated directly with UNITA.

On Nov. 4, a few days before the two Swedes were to arrive in Jamba, UNITA, through its Lisbon office,

contacted the Swedish Moderate Party, which immediately got in touch with the Stockholm foreign ministry. At that very moment, Foreign Minister Sten Andersson and Undersecretary Pierre Schori, unusually, were both abroad—in Havana.

Speaking from Cuba, Andersson found it appropriate to stress, "During my talks, I have found that Cuba and Sweden have a similar approach to most international issues." Sarcastic media comments could not but compare Andersson's untimely Cuban visit with Premier Carlsson's statement in the United States two months earlier, "From time to time, as is natural for two democratic governments, we are indeed evaluating international events differently." How come the Swedish government finds it so natural to disagree with democracies, while mostly agreeing with dictatorships?

The strange impression this left of Sweden's foreign policy orientation was not helped by statements by the two captive Swedes, about how well they had been treated by UNITA, an organization officially branded "terrorists" and "bandits" by their government. The two Swedes explained how well organized and disciplined UNITA was by comparison to the MPLA soldiers. Their escort at the time of their capture was drunk to a man, and represented a net loss to the security of the truck convoy.

The Swedish Moderate Party's mediation was nonetheless refused by the Swedish government. After returning home, Foreign Minister Andersson said he had a choice between the Moderates' mediation and parallel efforts conducted by U.S. Vice President George Bush. Despite Andersson's disagreements with U.S. policy, he said his choice in favor of Bush was not difficult to make. It delayed the release of the two Swedes by an estimated three weeks.