The oil industry in Sudan is leading to escalation of the civil war say voluntary organisations. The oil is helping to develop the country, says Carl Bildt, Sweden’s former Prime Minister and current UN envoy to the Balkans. Bildt is a board member of controversial oil company, Lundin Oil.

Maria Hamilton, press manager for Swedish oil company, Lundin Oil, is surprised. Since March this year, Lundin Oil has had more press coverage than they would have wished. The company has been the object of one critical report after another, resulting in a temporary fall on the stock exchange. And all because Lundin Oil built a road to the company’s most promising concession in southern Sudan.
- It’s being said that people have been bombed and forcibly displaced so that we could build the road. But the truth is that we built the road through an area where not very many people live, says Hamilton on the telephone from Geneva.

Lundin Oil has been operating in war-torn Sudan for around 10 years. In April 1999, they found promising reserves in Block 5a. In March 2000, they withdrew temporarily owing to “security and logistical issues”. They returned in January this year and the find was confirmed at the beginning of March. Block 5a, where Lundin Oil is operating, lies in southern Sudan, where the civil was is at its most brutal. Lundin Oil acknowledges there to be war in Sudan and that abuses are being committed, but that they are not party to it.
- There is a clear pattern as to what is being said and written about Sudan: the abuses take place where there is no international presence. Allegations about abuses in a village where Lundin holds the concession...refer, by all accounts, to a time when there was no international presence in the area, writes board member Carl Bildt by way of explanation on his personal website.
 **Clearing land by aerial bombing**

Christian Aid, an organisation which ahs been working in the Sudan for 30 years, tells the same story in a rather different way: In April 1999 Lundin Oil found that the test-drilling area Thar Jath had great potential. A month later, government soldiers entered the area and tens of thousands of people were forcibly displaced. In the space of the ten months from Lundin Oil’s withdrawal from the area until its return, a 75 kilometre road was built, financed by Lundin Oil and undertaken by armed Chinese workers. Government forces also helped however: First Antonov bombers bombed three villages to disperse the population. Soldiers then followed up on foot killing children and old people who had not yet fled.

- You won’t see a single hut. The government didn’t want anybody in the vicinity of the oil, says eye-witness John Wicjial Bayak. 80 year-old Liu Liu from the village of Chotylel tells us of how he dug a pit in the ground for his six grandchildren and laid a blanket over them so that the soldiers wouldn’t find them. The report from Christian Aid was published in March this year and confirms previous reports from the likes of Amnesty International, Canadian special envoy John Harker and provisional reports from Human Rights Watch and the UN. They all come to the same conclusion: The regime in Khartoum is using Sudan’s recently acquired oil wealth to intensify the war against opposition groups in the south. The bombing of the local population and the widespread use of a burnt earth policy have the express purpose of clearing the land to ease conditions for the oil companies, including Lundin Oil.

**No nomads to be seen**

At the end of April, reporters from *Dagens Nyheter* took a trip to Sudan. The journalists’ eye-witness accounts confirmed the Christian Aid report and gave the impression that the road was also of strategic military interest. Alongside the road, people live in poverty and desperate need. Maria Hamilton, however, remains immoveable: These people have not been displaced but have come to the road because the oil operations are positive for them. Lundin’s main argument is that oil operations help develop Sudan and, in the long term, will thus bring about the end of the war.
- We are dependent on cooperation with the local population, and that’s exactly what we do, she says. Sure enough, 20 of the 300 or so workers on the field are directly employed by Lundin Oil, the rest through contractors working for Lundin. None of these people are from South Sudan, one young man tells *DN*.
- It’s no surprise that the jobs go to people form the north of the country, says Stein Erik Horjen, special advisor from Norwegian Church Aid, an organisation that has been working both in the north and south for 30 years.
- People from the north have better education. In the south, the majority of the population are pastoralists, moving with the seasons. Perhaps that makes it easier to believe that no-one lives there, he says. Although the Sudanese oil industry has not been particularly profitable for the last couple of years, Horjen thinks it is wrong of the oil companies to suggest that their activities play no role in the war.
- The oil has been very important ever since the war broke out again in 1983. Oil workers from Chevron and Elf were kidnapped and all the various companies pulled out. The battle over natural resources is an important aspect of the war and the most important resources lie in the south. But development in the south has never been given priority, Horjen says, either by the British colonial authorities or by the current regime in Khartoum. He also thinks it difficult for those outside to monitor what is going on in the licensed areas.
- The areas are far from accessible and one has to have the oil companies’ blessing to travel there, he says.
 **Oils the weapons**

Lundin Oil’s director, Ian Lundin, goes out of his way to point the finger of suspicion at critics of the oil industry in Sudan. He thinks the oil eases the country’s debt, making it easier for Sudan to stand on its own two feet. “That’s maybe not good news for religious circles in Europe and America who prefer a picture of Sudan as a desolate nation where brutal Muslims kill women and children” he writes in an article in Swedish *Dagens Industri*. Even though, for once, the Christian Right in America is in agreement with more radical humanitarian organisations, religion is not at the crux of criticism of the oil companies. Another report from the International Monetary Fund finds that the Sudanese government has increased its military expenses since the land began to receive revenues from the oil. General Mohamed Yassin, for example, has also expressed that “Sudan is now capable of producing all the weapons the country needs, thanks to the growing oil industry”. Investments in agriculture and food security, however, have not been on the increase.

Kajsa Ekholm Friedman, African specialist and professor in social anthropology at Lund University, thinks Sudan fits in the with the general experience of the oil industry in African countries.
- What we see in Sudan, just as we do in many other African countries, is a structural conflict between the trans-national companies and the local population, she says. She knows of no examples where oil operations in Africa have contributed to better living conditions for poor people and thinks that onshore operations create more direct conflict than offshore drilling owing to competition over land rights.
- All our experience from Africa, whether it be from Angola, Congo-Brazzaville, Nigeria or Sudan, shows that it is the ruling class that reaps the benefits from oil. It is correct that oil producing countries can point to greater economic growth than other countries but this just means that they do not qualify for debt write-off. That doesn’t help the poor, says Ekholm Friedman. In principle she has nothing against industrial operations in Africa, nor even against the oil industry.
- The big mistake is that economic development in countries such as Sudan actually threatens the existence of the local population in practice. African farmers and nomads have nothing but the land they live on; if they lose that, they become really marginalised. And that we cannot accept. People like Carl Bildt cannot say that Lundin’s oil concession is nothing but marsh and swamp or that “nobody lives there”, because people move with the seasons. The rights of the local population must be secured, she says.