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SA/Thailand bound jets nearly disarmed in Sweden

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In the early morning of March 22, three peace activists were arrested at Saab Aerospace Systems' weapons factory in Linköping, Sweden. Martin Smedjeback, Annika Spalde and Pelle Strindlund were on their way to disarm Jas 39 Gripen fighter jets intended for export to India, Thailand and South Africa.

The peace activists, who are all part of the anti-militaristic network Ofog, entered Saab's industry area in Linköping, 200 kilometers from the capital Stockholm, by cutting holes in the barbed wire fence surrounding the area. Once inside, they observed a minute of silence, dedicated to the twenty children that die every minute because of poverty in a world that invests more money in weapons than in fighting poverty.

In 2010 the Indian air defence will order 126 Jas 39 Gripen fighter jets. Saab is currently marketing these jets in India with vast support from the Swedish government. If Saab gets the contract, the Swedish-built jet could be mounted with weapons of mass destruction, as part of the Indian nuclear weapon programme.

– India's 200 million starving citizens don't need expensive fighter jets. What they need is food and clean water. When I was in India in February, I saw the widespread poverty with my own eyes. Several Indian organizations begged us Swedes to stop the weapons export to their country, said Martin Smedjeback, 35, a non-violence educator.

As a symbol of the Indian resistance the activists put a picture of the Indian activist Elsey Jacob on the perimeter fence before going inside. A picture of the South African bishop Desmond Tutu was also put up. Tutu is working to make his government cancel the Jas 39 Gripen affair. In 1999 Saab managed to sell 28 Jas 39 Gripen to South Africa to a total of 17 billion Swedish crowns. South African social movements criticize this affair of being bribed. Beside, many critics claim that this weapon affair is taking resources from fighting poverty and HIV in South Africa.

– I simply can not accept that my country, by its weapons export, breeds conflicts and poverty. Sweden will deliver six Jas 39 Gripen to Thailand, despite the fact that the chief of Thai air defence declared in public that the planes will be used in the armed conflict in the Southern parts of the country, said Annika Spalde, 39, an author and lay worker in the Church of Sweden.

– The affair with South Africa is just as objectionable. According to the South African Christian council, the agreement should be stopped immediately. According to them the country's largest enemy is poverty and that the money is needed for that struggle, she continued.

– In general, we should follow the law, but senseless obedience is not in any way worth striving for. Civil disobedience by peacefully objecting the law can be an obligation in certain situations. When governments and companies cooperate to export weapons to poor countries and conflict zones, it is ordinary citizens' duty to intervene, says Pelle Strindlund, 37, an author.

The action in Linköping, Sweden, is part of the campaign "Avrusta" (Disarm) launched in the autumn of 2008. By public opinion raising and civil disobedience actions, the campaign aims to stop the Swedish weapons export. In October 2008, two coordinated disarmament actions took place in the towns of Karlskoga and Eskilstuna. Parts for the howitzer cannon (FH77B), going to India, and grenade launchers Carl Gustaf, used by the US army in Iraq, were disarmed. Two of the activists were sentenced to three months imprisonment and demands of 220 000 Swedish crowns, and two other activists to four months in prison.

You find more information at <http://www.avrusta.se>. There you also find video material from the action at the Jas 39 Gripen factory in Linköping, and photos of the activists. All this material is free for use.

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