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FLAMES OF INJUSTICE



The burning of refugee camps in Thailand by the Burmese military and their Democratic Karen Buddhist Army allies, has left more than 10,000 people homeless and facing a completely uncertain future. They seek nothing more than the basic human rights we all desire.

CHANGING TACTICS

by N. Chan

The Chin National Front (CNF) is one of the smaller groups struggling for self determination in Burma. They operate in the area where Burma borders with Bangladesh and India. Isolated from the international community, their struggle has never been documented as thoroughly as has the struggle of those groups operating along the Thai/Burma border. For many years the Burmese military did not even mention the Chin when identifying groups with which cease fire discussions had yet to be carried out. Recently, however, the Burmese military has begun to talk more about the need to dialogue with the CNF and its armed branch, the Chin National Army (CNA). There have also been increasing reports of Burmese military movements into the Chin area suggesting that major military campaigns may soon be launched against the people of the Chin State.

In the past, the CNA carried out mostly guerrilla strikes against Burmese military columns and outposts. The military's response to these guerrilla strikes was consistent with their tactic in all other regions of Burma; they took retaliatory action against civilian populations in the areas around the CNA guerrilla attacks. Chin State is one of the poorest regions in all of Burma and the military attacks against the people brought them even closer to total despair.

Finally, unable to bear the retributions of the Burmese military any longer, villagers approached the CNA and requested that they not carry out guerrilla raids against Burmese military columns and outposts. The CNA took the request seriously and began looking for other options to continue their struggle.

CNF discussions resulted in the formation of a new group called the Urban Ranger Force, or URF. The URF was to operate in the major urban centers of Chin State rather than in the rural areas. The logic for this new strategy was simple. First of all, it is more difficult for the military to retaliate against ur-

ban populations than it is for them to retaliate against villagers in isolated, unwitnessed terror raids. The villagers would, consequently, be safer. Secondly, if no guerrilla actions were taken against the rank and file of the Burmese army, the rank and file would feel less inclined to carry out orders from their officers against the people.

It is generally assumed that the rank and file of the Burmese army do not highly respect their officers who are often harsh and uncompromising with the men under their control. Young soldiers are usually from poor families and have little education. They join the army, not for ideological reasons, but for financial reasons.

The CNA decided that they should not consider these young soldiers as the enemy, but rather as victims of war. Therefore, no guerrilla actions should be aimed against them. The result could be a growing gap between the Burmese military officers and the men under their control. This would weaken the military substantially, thus strengthening the Chin people's struggle for self determination.

In a recent interview, a CNF representative said that the URF strategy has already had positive results. "The URF is strictly controlled by regulations laid down by the CNA headquarters" he said. "They are not allowed to gather any taxes from the villagers, or take any food or supplies from the people unless it is freely offered to them. They are also not allowed to carry out any action without a direct order from the Chief of Staff of the CNA". This has gained the respect and acceptance of villagers who feel like the CNF took their concerns and their suggestions seriously and is really concerned about their safety and welfare.

The CNF representative also stressed that after the URF stopped carrying out guerrilla actions in the rural areas, retaliation raids by the military against the villagers have also decreased substantially. Burmese soldiers stationed in the

rural outposts feel less threatened, and have begun treating villagers much more respectfully.

While it is too early to ascertain whether or not the URF has been successful in driving a decisive wedge between the officers and the rank and file of the Burmese military, villagers report that young Burmese soldiers who pass through their villages now often voice support for the URF.

For many decades the Burmese military leaders have successfully held on to power by using an army made up mostly of poor rural men to fight against the uprisings of the poor rural communities. The approach of the URF may well break that strategy by highlighting the fact that the rank and file of the Burmese army are not the enemy to fight against, but rather they too are victims. When they no longer submit to military orders, the military will lose its power over the country and democratic change will become more possible.



Preparing URF teams

FLAMES OF INJUSTICE

by CAC

The last week of January saw the violence of Burma's ethnic chauvinism escalate, brimming over the border into neighboring Thailand. On the night of January 28th, Burma army troops crossed the border in three simultaneous raids on refugee camps in Thailand. These three camps, with a total population of about thirty six thousand, house mostly ethnic minority Pwo and S'gaw Karens, although each has smaller populations of Burman, Burmese Muslim of Indian descent, Mon and Pa-O peoples. In each case the operation plan was similar: 100-200 troops entered a section of the camp, looting shops and clearly making their presence known. Within minutes, well-prepared teams were dispersed among the bamboo and thatch houses to set them on fire. In many cases, they warned the occupants to get out before torching their homes. When the camps were burning to their satisfaction, the troops regrouped and returned to their bases on the Burma side of the border. In Bae Klaw camp, which sustained the least damage, a nearby unit of Karen National Liberation Army troops surprised the attackers, exchanged fire and forced them into retreat.

By dawn, the damage was evident. Ten thousand refugees had been made homeless by the destruction of roughly 1700 houses. There were three deaths and three serious injuries. Churches, schools and a mosque had been destroyed. In Hway Ka Loke and Hway Bong refugee camps, most residents were completely surprised by the raids and saved virtually none of their possessions. In the following weeks, the majority of the refugees have remained camped in the vicinity of their former homes. They are unwilling and unable to rebuild their houses, lacking the materials and cash to do so, but most significantly lacking the confidence that whatever they rebuild won't just be destroyed in a repeat attack. Near Bae Klaw, the camp deepest inside Thailand, KNLA, Burma army and DKBA troops



The remains of Hway Ka Loke Refugee Camp

engaged in 48 hours of light combat following the initial attack, in which only 16 houses were destroyed. Eventually, the KNLA was successful in pushing the invaders back to the river bank, and eventually back into Burma.

Several blatant questions come to mind. What is gained by attacking refugee camps? What is the relationship between the Burma army and its paramilitary cohorts, the DKBA? How is it possible for Burmese troops to cross an international boundary undetected and undeterred, attack a civilian population then casually make their way back without Thailand's pursuit or retaliation? Where were the Thai security forces, particularly those with permanent bases near the camps, those assigned to guard the camps and the Border Patrol Police, who, as their name implies, are responsible to guard against illegal crossings? In many countries around the world, such an incident would spark the outbreak of war. Yet in Thailand there was but a brief flurry of news coverage and official double-talk until the attacks, the failings of the Thai army, and the refugees themselves were consigned to media oblivion.

Nevertheless, observers of Burma's civil war should take these camp attacks as an ominous sign. In several ways, the refugee raids indicate points of deterioration for human security among those most affected by the war. All reliable and well-informed reports indi-

cate that local Thai officials and even some refugee camp leaders were aware of the impending raids and did nothing to protect or even warn the populations. Residents of Hway Ka Loke camp report that the Royal Thai army unit manning a checkpoint at the main gate of the camp, facing the Moei river about 3 kilometers away, had collected all of their equipment and vacated the post by 1pm on the day of the attack. In at least one case, a high-level camp leader was seen packing his valuables into a pickup truck leaving the camp early in the evening.

Despite surprisingly little loss of life and serious injury, the damage to the refugees' morale has been considerable. Some believe that indeed this was the objective of the operation, rather than forcing refugees back across the river to Burma or assassinating Karen National Union leaders. Now that their bodies have been reclothed and the rice bowls replenished, the people face a much more difficult challenge of rejuvenating their vision for peace and struggle in the face of increasingly bold enemies.



REFUGEE VOICES: A PEOPLE'S VIEW OF RECENT VIOLENCE ON THE THAI-BURMA BORDER

Within three days after the attacks, a group of concerned camp residents began circulating questions among the refugees of both Hway Bong and Hway Ka Loke camps. The purpose was to twofold: to find out how people feel about this violation of their individual and communal dignity, and to provide them with a means of communicating with the outside world their thoughts and emotions. Some of the results are presented here, divided into a summary of refugees' answers to the specific questions and a selection of translated quotations from their written statements.

PART 1

QUESTIONS AND ANSWERS

Q. 1. How have you suffered as a result of this arson attack on the refugee camp?

Answers mostly focused on the obvious fact that the most of the camp population have been left without any possessions. There was also a strong vein of sympathy expressed for both the elderly and children, having to suffer such poverty at times in their lives when they ought to be getting well looked after.

Q. 2. Whose plan do you think it was to burn down the camp?

Of the answers received so far, there has been a unanimous response to this question — it was the plan of the SLORC. Many people also discussed how the Burma army is using DKBA for its own objectives, and a smaller number pointed out that since the Thai Army permitted the attack to occur, they must have had some involvement in the plan.

Q. 3. If the SLORC and the Thai Government arrange for repatriation to Burma, will you go or not? For what reasons?

As might be expected, the answers to this question were again unanimous — to not return — although with varying degrees of expression... "I won't go back;" "We'll never go back;" "I don't want to go back"... The reasons for this broad sweep of opinion, however, are varied, such as... "There is no peace in Burma;" "Our Karen ethnic group will be destroyed under the SLORC;" "The SLORC's rule is unfair;" "It is impossible to work for a living;" "If we go back we will live as slaves"... and a range of other opinions were expressed relating to general conditions of oppres-

sion, lack of rights regarding provision of basic human necessities and education inside Burma.

Q. 4. Would you like to stay at the site of the old camp, or do you wish to relocate the camp further inside Thailand, away from the border and the assailants?

Almost all answers to this question were to relocate the camp, without condition, other than the obvious fact that the new location would have to allow for adequate security. A very small number of people said that they would stay at the old site if guarantees for security could be given, and a few others said that they would stay at the old site only on the condition that they be given the right by the Thai authorities to bear arms in order to defend themselves, and if possible also be supplied weapons by the Thai Army. One or two people noted that they would be willing to stay anywhere that there was adequate provision for their security.

Q. 5. How would you like the Thai government to provide for your security?

The answers to this question were quite varied, because whilst everybody desires adequate protection, it is a matter of contention as to how this might be arrived at. A lot of people did not have any clear ideas about what sort of security arrangements would be desirable; they simply reiterated that security ought to be sufficient to prevent further attacks. Others stated that they want precise and detailed security from the Thai armed forces at all times. But there is also a strong vein of opinion in the answers that rejects outright the concept of the Thai military providing security, because they have failed so totally in the pretense of this provision to date, and this group of people seeks some entirely alternative security arrangements.

PART 2

REFUGEE VOICES

Each paragraph begins a new quotation by a different person. Because the answers were collected anonymously, there is no biographical description of the respondents.

"We haven't come to stay in a refugee camp because we want free rice and wish to sleep whenever we please. It is a result of a lack of security and rights in Burma, because of forced relocations and being unable to study in our own language [that we come.] We come and stay on this border in order to protect ourselves from an ethnic group that oppresses our people, so that we can eat adequately, and get rights to study as we like, and such that we can regain just a few of our basic human rights."

"Because others are always trying to turn us into slaves, we suffered so much and so we came to the refugee camp. Moreover, food is expensive and to work for a living is difficult under a chauvinist military government... Land rental costs are becoming higher and higher, and farmers must give all their produce to the Burmese government, so they have nothing left to eat for themselves... Beautiful girls are taken and raped [by soldiers], not treated as they should be, and after they become pregnant, they are abandoned. Parents cannot bear to look upon this scene, and so they come to stay at the border."

"What we had in the camp was sufficient for us, but the soldiers came and burnt it and now it is all lost, it has become ash... we have become like orphans with no parents, as refugees without security."



"We need for this war to end, and to return to live in our country in peace."

"I cannot possibly describe how much I have suffered as a result of this arson... As a Karen student I love study and my books are most valuable for me, but as a result of all my books being burnt, my study has ceased. Also, the education of the [younger] children is being destroyed, and so their opportunities for future development are halted. When I think about this I am greatly pained."

"When the refugee camp was burnt we had to run to save ourselves, and children, youths and elderly all ran, some carrying a few of their things. I myself ran, and was so saddened by the burning of our camp, our houses, and the breaking up of our community as a result of this military action... The worst thing is that I couldn't take any of my books, I only ran out as the house burnt, and it was like a dream. But as the sun rose I could see that my house and school were ashes, and most refugees sat and looked at where the fire had burnt down their houses, and seeing this situation I felt so hurt."

"A lot of Karens have become refugees with difficult and impoverished lives for a long time, and it should not be that there should yet be further misery and impoverishment. But terrible actions can bring about further impoverishment... However this is nothing special for us, this suffering is nothing special [not different to that of previously]. I can only say one thing — our rights should never be abused like this."

"As in accordance with the Convention on Refugees, we refugees should receive the same [human] rights as Thais, and shouldn't have to suffer in so many ways. If we leave the camp we must give 10 baht, and if we don't have money we have to sneak out secretly... For every month we stay in the camp we have to give 25-50 baht... Each time that we go to collect the rice which is donated to us we have to give 3-10 baht... Whatever happens, we need to be free from all this oppression and have the right to do some work for our livelihoods."

"The Thai soldiers cannot provide adequate security. If it was good security then this situation would never have occurred. What can be the meaning of this situation, that people come into our houses, kick us in the backsides, sleep with our wives, and then go away, whilst we sit and observe the whole thing...?"

"In the daytime my heart is the size of a melon, in the evening the size of an orange, and at night the size of a bean. [i.e.: fear increases as night falls]"

"If we reconsider the position of those whose country we have come to, we have presented ourselves as refugees, but why didn't they provide us with security? Why did they allow armed people to come into our camp like this?"

"What we need is for all people to understand our situation, and all other peoples to assist us with our problems..."

What we need is for people not to be laying blame upon us for our situation..."

"How can a motor vehicle run without a key to start it? The SLORC has said that this arson attack had nothing to do with them, that it is only between Karen. Everything (in Burma) has something to do with the SLORC. In this regard, I truly swear that this action was the plan of the SLORC. The SLORC is turning the key."

"Some Thai leaders have stated that this matter is between ourselves [as Karens] and therefore is a matter regarding only us. This hurts me most of all. Those who planned and instigated this action are the military leaders of the SLORC."

"If the Thai government will not deal adequately with our security, then we want them to give us refugees enough weapons so that we can work cooperatively to take care of our security. But if we are to work cooperatively in that fashion, then we require equal rights for both parties involved."

"If we are to be forcibly repatriated, we won't go. We can't go. Likewise, we shouldn't have to go. We have never thought about returning to Burma... The government of Burma is a thief of the people's right to rule, and of the public's greatest valuable, that is the right to freedom, which it steals while terrifying the citizens."

"We need for this war to end, and to return to live in our country in peace."

Source:

Collected, translated and compiled by Burma Issues' Mae Sot staff and friends



MORALS AND CORPORATE RESISTANCE

by C.E.K.

Last June, Massachusetts Governor Weld set a precedent by passing a state-wide selective purchasing law. At the ceremony attended by activists and politicians alike, Weld admitted that, "One law passed by one state will not end the suffering and oppression of the people of Burma, but it is my hope that other states and the congress will follow our example, and make a stand for the cause of freedom and democracy around the world. Burmese and non-Burmese, republicans and democrats have all come together to prove that human rights take precedence over corporate profits."

In response, several American companies, including Apple, Eastman Kodak, Hewlett-Packard and Phillips Electronics, terminated their operations in Burma, but more recently, the Mobile corporation has expressed displeasure with the Massachusetts law. Mobile stands to lose several contracts to operate petrol filling stations along the Massachusetts interstate tollway. After a six month honeymoon period, the Massachusetts legislation has also begun to stir up negative international pressures. On behalf of Sony, Mitsubishi, the Bank of Tokyo and thirty other companies who can not do business with the Massachusetts state government, the Japanese government complained to the US State Department in January. Since then, the EU has also complained that the law violates World Trade Organization rules about government purchasing.

Because the government of Massachusetts represents a relatively small amount of money, Japan and the EU are not concerned about Massachusetts per se, but rather about the potential for the Massachusetts legislation to spread to other states and perhaps the national government. Multinational corporations have allowed selective purchasing policies to exist in cities, counties and university campuses without any major fuss. This does not mean that the mul-

tionals do not care about small scale selective purchasing policies, but rather that they likely did not want to oppose all levels of selective purchasing and appear paranoid. Now that multinationals who do business with Burma realize the expanding potential and resulting economic ramifications of state-wide selective purchasing legislations, they are beginning to use their clout in an attempt to influence the US government, and subsequently individual states, to hinder such legislation.

For example, the Japanese consulate in the US has subtly stated that, "Massachusetts exports more than \$1.5 billion in goods to Japan every year, more than to any other country except Canada," and that, in addition to the money Japanese tourists spend in the US, Japanese companies employ 13,000 residents of Massachusetts. Is Japan suggesting that it is willing to slap sanctions against Massachusetts or force Japanese companies, most of which are not invested in Burma, to fire their employees in Massachusetts? Probably not, but such implications from one of the world's economic leaders are strong enough to intimidate some, perhaps most, states.

Fortunately for Massachusetts, the three tiered structure of the government in the US (federal, state and local) offers each level a certain degree of autonomy. The US federal government may have agreed to WTO standards, but each state and local legislature has not. Depending on the wording of the WTO agreement signed by the US federal government, Japanese and European multinationals might learn that they will have to fight selective purchasing policies on the lower levels of government in the US.

And if Massachusetts is any indication, lobbying each state or city will require increased vigilance and hard work. In response to the Japanese and EU, Governor Weld proudly stated that Massachusetts led the world in boycotting South Africa and questioned the

right of a foreign nation to tell the taxpayers of Massachusetts how their money should be spent within their own state.

The Boulder Friends for a Democratic Burma (BFDB) have also argued that individual states and cities have the right to pass selective purchasing laws as a part of their domestic policy because such laws are concerned with how taxpayers' dollars are spent locally, not internationally. The BFDB also cites local problems created by Burmese narcotics as a further justification for local and state-level selective purchasing laws.

Burma activists should prepare to defend the right of individual states and cities to pass selective purchasing laws, arguably the most powerful international campaign tool. The loss of selective purchasing legislation would give a virtual green light to invest in Burma, especially to large industrial companies who are more resilient to boycotts on the grassroots level.

Even if states maintain the right to pass selective purchasing laws, Burma activists should take note of growing international corporate opposition. Precedents have paved the road to influencing other cities, counties and states, but a mountain of multinational interests may lie just around the corner.

Sources:

BP 970202

Transcript of Governor Weld's bill signing speech

BFDB response to general questions about a selective purchasing resolution on Burma



MOVING TOWARDS PEACE?

by N. Chan

Constructive engagement by ASEAN, benchmark diplomacy of Australia, isolation policies of the West and a plethora of critical UN statements are some of the international responses during the last eight years to the military's iron grip over the country of Burma. Yet, hope for a true peace in the country is further away than ever. According to an Amnesty International report, "Last year was the worst for human rights in Burma since 1990. While the world talks about constructive engagement, things are going backwards in Burma."

The past few months have left little doubt of that. At the end of January, Burmese military troops, along with soldiers of the Democratic Karen Buddhist Army (DKBA), entered Thai territory and destroyed several refugee camps leaving over 10,000 refugees homeless. In the past few weeks, the Burmese military has launched a major military campaign along the Thai/Burma border which has resulted in a new, massive influx of refugees into Thailand. Reports of human rights abuses throughout the country continue to pile up, and, as Amnesty further notes, there is "an almost complete intolerance [by the military] of any peaceful political activity whatsoever [inside Burma]."

The major reason for this failure to make any progress towards true peace is that these various international approaches all seem to have one thing in common; none of them have moved from words to any type of clear and decisive action, and as long as the Burmese military is convinced that nothing but words, even very negative ones, will be thrown at them, they will not see the importance of sitting down with the groups to map out a progressive road map to peace.

The weakness of this international response can be seen by reactions to the burning of the refugee camps inside Thai territory. Thai Foreign Ministry spokesman Surapong Jayanama called the attacks and torchings "an act of terrorism" and said the violence was "a blatant vio-

lation of Thai sovereignty". He further added, "In a civilized world, nobody would commit such an act of terrorism." Yet Thailand later reconfirmed its constructive engagement policy towards the Burmese military, continued to welcome Burma into the ASEAN community, and failed to take any significant actions against this "blatant violation of Thai sovereignty". Since the burnings of the camps, Burmese troops have again entered Thai territory and, in two cases, exchanged fire with Thai border patrol police and stole a Thai military pickup filled with ammunition and supplies.

The USA's reaction was no more positive. The US State Department called on the government of Burma to, "cease its support for repression and violence against the ethnic minorities and to respect international humanitarian principles and obligations towards refugees." Despite legislation which empowers the US president to place economic sanctions against the military regime, Clinton has made no move to initiate such action. It is also ironic and very sad to note that, several months earlier, the US warned the Karen National Union that if they carried out any action against the Total/Unocal gas pipeline which is being laid through Karen territory, the US would consider that an act of terrorism which might affect food aid from the US to Karen refugees along the Thai/Burma border. The question as to why an attempt to protect one's traditional lands from a giant US oil company is an act of terrorism meriting such possible and serious reprisal, but the destruction of the homes and properties of more than 10,000 defenseless refugees is not, has yet to be answered. The fact remains that the Burmese military is getting off with only a verbal slap on the wrist for the suffering and terror they have meted out against people seeking refugee and security on Thai soil.

While there are many issues which must be addressed in Burma, the greatest is that of peace. Providing housing, food, medical care, and security for refugees is an

important task, but until there is a true peace within the country, they will never be able to go back to their homes and establish stable and happy lives. Documenting human rights abuses is essential to alert the world to the realities facing the people of Burma, but until there is peace those abuses will continue and probably worsen. Providing educational opportunities and skills training to Burmese young people is a commendable work, but until there is peace those young people will have little opportunity to use that education and those skills to really benefit their communities and their nation. Using long and slow diplomatic strategies to change the nature of the Burmese military may be politically correct, but in the meantime many thousands of Burmese civilians will lose their land, their possessions, their dignity and even their lives.

Peace in Burma is the issue of utmost urgency now, and that peace will not come through cease-fire talks, and most certainly not through the overpowering of indigenous struggles by a stronger and better equipped military machine. Peace in Burma will only come when the conflicting groups sit down at a table in equality, discuss the roots of the conflict, and sincerely seek ways of guaranteeing that the mistakes and chauvinism of the past will not be repeated.

This will not take place unless the military sees mutual dialogue as essential for their own survival. Words alone from the international community will not convince the military of the need for such talks. The UN and its various member governments must finally get the political backbone needed to neutralize the Burmese military and bring them to the negotiating table.

Sources:

TN970212, TN970214, TN970207, TN970201, TN970130



NEWS BRIEFS

At a series of meetings in Singapore, European and Asean foreign ministers allowed a one-sentence mention of Burma in the Asean-EU declaration. It says the group "had an exchange of views on Myanmar [Burma]". The EU wanted to use the name Burma, but Asean prefers Myanmar. The two groups discussed Burma for about two hours and both sides agreed the talks had been the most substantial and productive held so far. During the discussions, Singaporean officials defended Asean's stance on Human rights and emphasized the importance of not considering one side right and the other wrong. TN970214

A UN foreign ministry source said Francesc Vendrell's (director for East Asia in the UN's political affairs dept.) trip to Burma, was "low-profile" and confined to "official calls". New York officials said he was in Burma to try to set the stage for talks between the government and opposition leaders; however, no meeting was scheduled with the opposition. He met Ohn Gyaw and Than Aung, secretary-general of the USDA,

who explained the USDA's efforts to promote "stability, peace, and tranquillity and development of the state". TN970220

The AFL-CIO, the largest US labour organisation, has urged Clinton to implement economic sanctions against Burma and asked US corporations to divest from Burma. It cited arrests of opposition leaders, a military offensive against the Karen and forced labour. TN970221

Unocal recently said the best way to promote democracy in Burma is for firms like fast food giant McDonalds to join Unocal there. Unocal is expanding its operations in Burma and says its investment will benefit Burmese people long after the Slorc. Unocal cited contributions to malaria research, vaccinations for children, road construction, bridges, schools, hospitals and other public works projects. John Rafuse, manager and director of Unocal's Washington office remarked, "We feel that the kinds of things we're doing are so good that ... the right way to go about this is to have more and more American companies in there fol-

lowing this model. Somebody said the thing that would have taken Castro out 25 years ago was putting a McDonalds in Havana." He voiced hope that Clinton would steer clear of any unilateral sanctions. TN970206

Thailand will have to pay 45 million baht per day to Burma and international oil groups if it fails to take delivery of Burmese offshore natural gas as contracted. The amount adds up to 16.42 billion baht per year. This financial burden contrasts the environmental concerns of laying the pipeline through the Thong Pha Phum forest which could further delay the project. Kanchanaburi conservationists oppose laying the pipeline through A-1 status areas. Senior PTT officials said Thailand could not afford to deter the Thai section of the pipeline due to the costs and Thailand's rocketing electricity demand. Mannesman of Germany has been contracted to lay the 3.8 billion baht line, and construction must begin before the rainy season. BP970222



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