



## General Assembly GA/SPD/572

Department of Public Information • News and Media Division • New York

Sixty-ninth General Assembly

Fourth Committee  
20<sup>th</sup> Meeting (PM)

### **Amid Growing Needs, Shrinking Resources, International Community Must Urgently Address Palestine Refugees' Plight, Relief Agency Head Tells Fourth Committee**

Growing needs due to escalating conflict in the region amid a glaring funding shortfall in the United Nations agency for Palestine refugees had brought new urgency to the international community to address the vulnerability of the refugee community, the Fourth Committee (Special Political and Decolonization) heard today, as it began its annual consideration of the Agency's work.

Pierre Krähenbühl, Commissioner-General of the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East (UNRWA), said Palestine refugees and non-refugees alike were emerging from the unprecedented violence and destruction experienced during the 50-day conflict in July and August. Over 1,500 civilians in Gaza — among them 538 children, 306 women and 11 UNRWA colleagues — had been killed; 11,000 people had been injured and some 1,500 children had been orphaned.

The funding gap of the Agency — which serviced 5.1 million refugees in the West Bank, including East Jerusalem, Gaza and neighbouring Jordan, Syria and Lebanon — presently stood at \$56 million, equivalent to one month's operating costs, he said, urging all Member States to find ways to fund UNRWA's core work before year-end.

By sustaining UNRWA in its mission to provide health, education, social services, protection and emergency assistance, and by providing the necessary diplomatic and financial support, Mr. Krähenbühl added, the international community could address the vulnerability of the Palestine refugee community and protect its rights.

In an interactive dialogue that followed, the Deputy Permanent Observer of the State of Palestine and the representatives of Egypt, Iran, Malaysia, Israel and Pakistan asked questions on various aspects of the Agency's activities and difficulties.

Introducing the report of the Working Group on the Financing of UNRWA, its Rapporteur, Meena Syed, expressed concern over the funding gap anticipated for the Agency's General Fund, and encouraged the international community to redouble efforts to close it. An injection of \$165 million was needed to provide UNRWA with a working capital and a minimum safety cushion, she said.

When the floor was opened for debate, the Deputy Permanent Observer of the State of Palestine said more than five million Palestinians continued to suffer insecurity, repeated displacement and dispossession, as well as widespread poverty and other hardships as a direct result of the denial of their rights and the failure to achieve a just solution. The recent horrific Israeli aggression against Gaza again highlighted the extreme vulnerability of the Palestine refugees.

The representative of Iran, speaking on behalf of the Non-Aligned Movement, called on the international community to uphold its moral, political and legal responsibilities to end Israel's illegal policies and all its violations against the Palestinian people. The Movement recognized the added demands UNRWA was facing because of the Palestine refugee situation in Syria and encouraged all donors to help the Agency overcome its large funding gaps.

Speaking on behalf of the Organization of Islamic conference, the representative of Saudi Arabia said the growing danger in which UNRWA continued to operate resulted from hostilities committed by Israel, which must be compelled to stop its aggression and occupation.

Stating that displacement in the region was no longer an emergency but a crisis that required a long-term strategy, Jordan's representative said her country would continue to host Palestinian refugees until the establishment of an independent State of Palestine.

Also making statements today were representatives of Mexico, India, Malaysia, Thailand and Iceland, as well as the European Union.

The Committee will reconvene at 12 noon on Wednesday, 5 November to conclude its consideration of the work of UNRWA.

#### Background

The Fourth Committee (Special Political and Decolonization) met this afternoon to begin its consideration of the operations of the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees (UNRWA), for which it had before it the report of UNRWA's Commissioner General (document [A/69/13](#)), containing the Agency's 2013 annual report, the report of the Working Group on the Financing of UNRWA (document [A/69/391](#)), the Secretary-General's report on persons displaced as a result of the June 1967 and subsequent hostilities (document [A/69/345](#)), his report on Palestine refugees' properties and their revenues (document [A/69/351](#)) and his note (document [A/69/349](#)) transmitting the sixty-eighth report of the United Nations Conciliation Commission for Palestine.

#### Briefing

PIERRE KRÄHENBÜHL, Commissioner-General of UNRWA, said the Palestine refugee community presently amounted to 5.1 million, just under one-third of the world's total refugee population and equivalent to the population of Norway or Singapore. Speaking of the refugees' situation, he said that today more than ever hope was needed and political action was urgently required to tackle fundamental issues that determined the fate and plight of the refugees. "It has been a torrid year for the Agency," he said, pointing to the moribund economy, high unemployment, particularly among youth, rising food insecurity and dependence on food aid.

Palestine refugees and non-refugees alike were emerging from the unprecedented violence and destruction experienced during the 50-day conflict in July and August, he said. Over 1,500 civilians in Gaza, including 538 children, 306 women and 11 UNRWA colleagues had been killed. Some 1,500 children were orphaned and 11,000 people were injured. Homes had been destroyed, leaving 110,000 people homeless. The fighting also destroyed more than 500 businesses, crippled Gaza's power plant, killed 40 per cent of its livestock and ruined prime agricultural land.

The Agency had been affected by seven incidents of munitions fired at its schools, he continued, three of them resulting in over 42 deaths and an estimated 200 people with multiple injuries. Strongly condemning those attacks on United Nations premises, which constituted violations of international law by Israel, he called for investigations and accountability. "We also discovered weapons components hidden in three of our schools: we were proactive and transparent in informing all key parties about these discoveries and we publicly condemned these violations of international law", he added. The independent Board of Inquiry to be established by the Secretary-General would look at all major incidents that affected United Nations operations, notably those of UNRWA, during the crisis. Turning to Gaza's reconstruction, he said UNRWA was seeking \$1.68 billion to enable it to rebuild 14,000 destroyed refugee homes, repair over 70,000 refugee dwellings and 118 UNRWA buildings, rehabilitate camp infrastructure and provide essential relief, food, and temporary shelter to those in need. For major rebuilding to take place, commercial traffic through the crossing points into Gaza must be massively and sustainably expanded. In addition, exports of goods and produce from Gaza, reduced to virtually zero in recent years under the blockade, must be resumed. "Without rapid progress on these two tracks, Gaza will continue its precipitous slide, with growing unemployment and a total lack of prospects, especially among young men and women, increased aid dependency and increased poverty", he warned.

To make Gaza liveable again, he noted, the most pressing need was to address the underlying causes of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict: an end to the occupation that had persisted for nearly half a century and a full lifting of the illegal blockade of the Gaza Strip. "A change of paradigm is required and only dedicated and determined political action by the international community can bring it about," he emphasized. Turning to the West Bank, he said the situation of the 750,000 Palestine refugees there had also deteriorated, pointing to the threatened forcible displacement of approximately 7,000 people in and around 45 residential areas. Overall, socioeconomic conditions in the West Bank, including East Jerusalem, continued to deteriorate for Palestine refugees, with systematic Israeli restrictions on the movement of Palestinians and their conduct of trade causing widespread poverty and unemployment.

Another challenge facing UNRWA was the high level of conflict and instability in other countries hosting Palestine refugees, fuelling regional insecurity, he said. In Syria, refugees grappled continually with the perils and suffering inflicted as a result of an armed conflict in which all sides frequently disregarded international law, notably the obligation to protect civilians and their property. Only 47 per cent of UNRWA's regional crisis response needs of \$427 million had been met this year. That was insufficient to give regular basic support to the Palestine refugee community in Syria, as well as in Lebanon - home to approximately 400,000 registered Palestine refugees, living in often very difficult socioeconomic circumstances — and in Jordan — which hosted the largest number of registered Palestine refugees in any single country, amounting to some two million.

Despite the considerable challenges, the Agency had undertaken complex internal reforms designed to make it more effective and innovative in implementing its work, and resulting in the improved provision of services, he said. It had improved its dialogue with partners and stakeholders, as well as reformed its education and health programmes. UNRWA's relief and social programmes reforms included an increased focus on development, economic empowerment and sustainable livelihood activities.

Turning to funding, he said the gap presently stood at \$56 million, equivalent to one month's operating costs, urging all Member States to find ways to fund UNRWA's core work before year-end. By supporting and sustaining UNRWA in its mission to provide health, education, social services, protection and emergency assistance to refugees, and by providing the diplomatic and financial support necessary for UNRWA to discharge its tasks, he added, the international community could ensure that the vulnerability of the Palestine refugee community was addressed and that refugees' rights were protected.

#### Interactive Dialogue

During the discussion that followed, the Deputy Permanent Observer of the State of Palestine commended the Commissioner-General for his principled statements, including throughout the latest crisis endured by the Palestinian people as Israel, the occupying Power, carried out yet another war against the Gaza Strip. She reaffirmed the gratitude of the Palestine people and Government for the valiant efforts of UNRWA's staff, who had upheld the Agency's humanitarian mission with commitment and courage, despite a volatile and complex operational environment and rising challenges. She sought details on the conditions in UNRWA's shelters, the provisions necessary to support the long-term internally displaced and funding support required by the Agency.

The representative of Egypt, commending UNRWA staff members for their work and commitment, said financing of the Agency was the responsibility of the international community. He asked what specific requests UNRWA wanted to convey to Member States in terms of funding and political support.

Responding to the first round of questions, Mr. KRÄHENBÜHL said that while UNRWA provided basic food, hygiene and shelter, the schools were not equipped to shelter 3,000 to 5,000 people for an extended period of time. Weeks after the end of the conflict, the displaced still lived in those schools and desperately needed humanitarian assistance. A second challenge was recovery work for people whose homes were damaged during the conflict. Donors were questioning the need to rebuild Gaza while there was no assurance that it would not be destroyed again. It would take a few more weeks before the population moved from shock to anger. Hence, there was no time to sit back.

In terms of specific request to Member States, he said UNRWA had an ongoing request for strong diplomatic support. The Agency's biggest challenge was to obtain money for its General Fund — not to expand the bureaucracy but to make sure services such as health and education continued.

Opening the second round of questions, the representative of Iran wondered what value there was in raising funds for reconstructing Gaza when the occupying Power could decide to destroy everything.

Stating that it was imperative to lift the illegal and inhumane blockade, the representative of Malaysia asked whether, in the interim, the tripartite United Nations agreement had helped to provide services and begin reconstruction.

The representative of Israel said his Government had extended full cooperation to the UNRWA team on logistical, consular, administrative and operational levels. He was surprised that the Commissioner-General had devoted 25 minutes to an exhaustive analysis of the 50-day war in Gaza during the summer but had spent a mere five minutes to analyse the war in Syria that had lasted several years. Israel had undertaken a criminal investigation of one of the cases cited, but the Commissioner-General had hastened to condemn the country. He listened in vain for a single word of condemnation regarding the situation in Syria. The representative of Pakistan, referring to UNRWA's construction of 30 schools in Gaza in the midst of far greater destruction of existing ones during the conflict, wanted to know how this had impacted education there.

In his response, Mr. KRÄHENBÜHL said UNRWA focused on reconstruction on Gaza as it was a humanitarian imperative and the mandate given to it by Member States. He acknowledged that the political environment defined how the Agency worked and added that it currently worked with all actors involved to find solutions.

On the tripartite agreement, he said material for reconstruction was sold to the population, but the quantities needed were huge and required a regular flow. Over half of the population of Gaza was under 25 years of age and needed work, which reconstruction efforts could provide.

Regarding cooperation between UNRWA and Israel, he acknowledged significant progress. However, he rejected the idea that he paid more attention to the situation in Gaza than to that in Syria. He would continue to work with Israel on the investigations and would not prejudge the findings.

On the state of education in Gaza, Mr. Krähenbühl said UNRWA was able to bring children back to schools. However, many schools buildings were still sheltering displaced people, which underscored the need to turn them once again into places of teaching and learning.

#### Introduction of Report of Working Group on UNRWA Financing

MEENAS YED, Rapporteur of the Working Group on the Financing of UNRWA, introducing the Working Group's report ([document A/68/388](#)), said the Agency needed to provide emergency assistance in the aftermath of the conflict in Gaza this year, and continue to provide vital healthcare, food and educational support to 480,000 Palestine refugees in Syria and 42,000 refugees in Lebanon, all the while facing an acute funding shortage in all five fields of operation. Expressing concern over the funding gap for the General Fund — which faced a \$58 million shortfall in 2014 — and for the Gaza Reconstruction and Emergency Appeal and the Syrian Regional Crisis Plan, she strongly encouraged the international community to redouble efforts to close that gap, thus enabling UNRWA to respond to the needs of the 5.1 million Palestine refugees. An injection of \$165 million was needed to provide UNRWA with a working capital and a minimum safety cushion.

As of August 2014, UNRWA had received pledges totalling just 37 per cent of its \$300 million emergency appeal target, forcing it to suspend its school feeding programme and other services in Gaza and the West Bank, she said. Extra staffing needs and logistical costs due to Israeli security procedures in Gaza exceeded \$6.7 million in 2013, she said, stressing the need for the mechanism negotiated between the Palestinian Authority, Israel and the United Nations to facilitate inputs of dual use building materials into Gaza to work successfully.

As of October 2014, the Agency had received pledges amounting to 47 per cent of what was required for the Syrian Regional Crisis Plan, which covered programmes in Syria, Lebanon and Jordan, she said. The lack of funding had created increased deprivation and unsatisfied humanitarian needs. The Working Group called on all neighbouring countries to maintain open their borders for Palestine refugees fleeing from Syria and asked all parties to the conflict to preserve the neutrality of the camps and security of the refugees in Syria.

She also provided an update on the situation and financial challenges in Lebanon. The task of rebuilding the Nahr el-Bared Camp and assisting 27,000 refugees displaced since 2007 remained immense. In addition to the shortfall under its emergency relief services, the Agency required \$6 million for 2014 to

support those Palestine refugees still unable to return home. A further \$157 million was needed to complete the camp's reconstruction. UNRWA was a key actor in providing aid to Palestine refugees and in promoting stability and security in the Middle East, she said. Maintaining the Agency's services at an acceptable level and ensuring funding kept pace with the changing needs and growth of the refugee population were the international community's responsibility. She strongly urged Governments to contribute to and fully fund the General Fund on a regular basis, increase their contributions, and ensure that the real value of those contributions was maintained and that donor support for emergency-related and special projects did not decrease contributions to the General Fund. She also urged members of the League of Arab States to fulfil their pledge to fund 7.8 per cent of UNRWA's core budget. The continued commitment of the international community to the refugees remained essential in the absence of a durable solution to their problem.

#### Statements

FEDA ABDELHADY-NASSER, Deputy Permanent Observer of the State of Palestine, said more than five million Palestinians continued to suffer insecurity, repeated displacement and dispossession, as well as widespread poverty and other hardships as a direct result of the denial of their rights and the failure to achieve a just solution. The recent horrific Israeli aggression against Gaza again highlighted the extreme vulnerability of the Palestine refugees.

A just solution to the Palestine refugee question rested on the validity and centrality of the following rights: the right of Palestine refugees to return and to a just compensation for their losses and suffering based on [Assembly resolution 194](#) (1948) and in accordance with international law and principles of justice and equity; and the right of the Palestinians displaced in the June 1967 hostilities to return to their homes and lands, in accordance with relevant United Nations resolutions and implementation of the mechanism agreed to more than 21 years ago by the parties.

She reiterated the State of Palestine's absolute denunciation of Israeli rhetoric denying the rights of the refugees and any responsibility for their plight. That was a vehement rejection that cleared any doubts regarding the deliberate nature of their expulsion and obstruction of their return, an undeniable project of ethnic cleansing.

In the absence of a just solution, renewed international commitment and efforts to resolve the refugee question were needed, she said. Recognizing countries hosting refugees and the cooperation of the donor community, she urged full support of UNRWA and pointed to its indispensable and stabilizing role carried out through its various programmes and services. Echoing the Commissioner-General's statement, she said humanitarian aid alone could not make up for the denial of dignity and rights, and stressed the urgency of security and a credible political horizon to address all core final status issues.

HOSSEIN MALEKI (Iran) speaking on behalf of the Non-Aligned Movement, said Gaza's economy had been crippled by the Israeli blockade imposed over the past seven years. The Non-Aligned Movement called on the international community to uphold its moral, political and legal responsibilities to end Israel's illegal policies and all its violations against the Palestinian people. It called upon Israel, the occupying Power, to abide by its obligations under the [Fourth Geneva Convention](#), and relevant United Nations resolutions, including Council resolution 1860 (2009). It recognized the added demands UNRWA was facing because of the Palestine refugee situation in Syria. The Movement encouraged all donors to the Cairo Conference on Palestine and Reconstructing Gaza, held on 2 October 2014, to be generous and help the Agency overcome its large funding gaps. In this regard, the Movement welcomed [Assembly resolution 65/272](#) and its request to the Secretary-General to strengthen UNRWA by providing financing through the regular budget of the United Nations.

ABDALLAH Y. AL-MOUALLIM (Saudi Arabia), speaking as the Arab Coordinator and on behalf of the Organization of Islamic Cooperation, said UNRWA continued to operate in the midst of growing danger resulting from hostilities committed by the Israeli occupation. He urged the international community to increase their contributions to finance the rebuilding of Gaza and the Agency's programmes and to overcome its difficulties and financial problems.

He said the final solution to the chronic problem would not take effect without an end to the occupation and the return of the refugees. The OIC held Israel — the occupying Power — solely and fully responsible for its shameful killing of innocent Palestinians, for destroying thousands of homes, buildings, and infrastructure, and for all human and material damage suffered by the Palestinian people in the Gaza Strip. The time had come to compel Israel to stop its aggression, end the occupation, dismantle the settlements, end the siege of Gaza, release prisoners and offer protection for the Palestinian people in line with United Nations resolutions, international legitimacy and humanitarian law.

IOANNIS VRALAS, Deputy Head of the European Union Delegation, said that, as stressed during the Council's 21 October open debate, the international community could not be expected to "pick up the pieces and to pick up the bill after each new round of violence". Fundamental and durable change had to be brought to the Gaza Strip while the underlying causes of the violence were being addressed. The European Union condemned the shelling of UNRWA schools in Gaza and called on all parties to respect the inviolability and integrity of United Nations premises. It was essential that the Palestinian Authority assumed its full governmental responsibilities in the Gaza Strip and that the Israeli Government lifted restrictions to socio-economic development, particularly concerning movement and access issues.

The Agency faced another terrible crisis in Syria where 14 staff members had been killed and another 26 had been detained or were missing. The European Union called on all parties to the Syrian conflict, particularly the Assad regime, to fully implement all provisions of Council resolutions 2039 (2012) and 2165 (2014), as well as its presidential statement of 2 October 2013. The European Union was deeply grateful to neighbouring countries for sheltering refugees from Syria and reaffirmed its commitment to keep providing assistance to support refugees and host communities, he said. Yet it was alarmed by reports of Palestinian refugees being turned back as they attempt to flee conflict and it reaffirmed the importance of the principle of non-*refoulement*. The European Union and its Member States remained the largest provider of international assistance to Palestine refugees. In 2013, the European Union had contributed more than half of all donors' support to UNRWA's General Fund and about 43 per cent of overall contributions to its \$1.1 billion operational budget. Yet the European Union was increasingly concerned by the Agency's unsustainable financial situation and said ways had to be found to meet its financial needs.

SONIA ISHAQ AHMAD SUGHAYAR (Jordan), associating herself with the Non-Aligned Movement and Organization of the Islamic Cooperation, said that the host countries of refugees, who were increasing in number day by day, should not bear the burden alone. Donor countries should help UNRWA fulfil its mandate to provide assistance to the five million Palestinian refugees. The Agency's medium-term strategy 2016-2021 was especially important. To improve living conditions of the refugees, basic services and small credit funds must be provided to them. Jordan had been a strategic partner in supporting Palestinian refugees, hosting more than two million of them. But funding provided to Palestinian refugees in Jordan was disproportionate. In addition, 600,000 Syrian refugees were in Jordan, further depleting its resources. Opening one's borders and receiving assistance should be parallel. Displacement in Jordan and neighbouring countries was no longer an emergency, but a crisis that required a long-term strategy. Jordan would continue to host Palestinian refugees until the establishment of an independent State of Palestine. She urged Israeli authorities to implement the relevant Security Council and General Assembly resolutions, including one calling for the lifting of the Gaza blockade.

RICARDO ALDAY GONZÁLEZ (Mexico) recognized the work done by UNRWA's staff in Gaza, Syria and Lebanon and welcomed the heroic behaviour of its personnel during the latest conflict in the Gaza Strip. The attacks on UNRWA's facilities constituted a serious violation of international law and should be thoroughly investigated. In Gaza alone, more than 2,000 people died during the conflict and a greater number of people had been displaced due to the destruction of houses and facilities. Understanding the humanitarian emergency that the Palestinian people faced, Mexico had pledged \$1.1 million to UNRWA in addition to its regular contribution. His country was concerned about the reconstruction process. The cause of the conflict must be addressed to ensure that similar destruction would not occur again. He called for the lifting of the blockade, which jeopardized the economic and social rights crucial to ensure the minimum wellbeing of the Palestinian refugee. He reiterated the urgent need to resolve the underlying problem in the region and asked both parties to resume peace talks as soon as possible. He called on the parties involved to refrain from actions that would undermine trust and delay a solution to the conflict, and expressed hope that the two sides would show enough political will to find a lasting solution to the conflict.

Mr. KUMAR (India) said India had provided strong political support to the Palestinian cause and consistently extended technical and financial assistance to Palestine. In addition, it contributed \$1 million annually to UNRWA and had pledged \$4 million for the National Early Recovery and Reconstruction Plan for Gaza and \$1 million for a new project to reconstruct the Atta Habib medical centre in Gaza. With the fragile and unpredictable situation in the Middle East region, UNRWA's role in providing critical assistance to the Palestinians refugees was even more important. The Agency's pursuit of its mandate, despite a confrontational atmosphere, showed the international community's commitment to the well-being of the Palestinian refugees until a just and durable settlement was reached. India commended UNRWA for diligently serving nearly five million Palestinian refugees in Jordan, Syria and the West Bank and Gaza Strip under extremely difficult conditions.

HUSSEIN HANIFF (Malaysia) associated itself with the representative of Iran's statements on behalf of the Non-Aligned Movement and the representative of Saudi Arabia's statement on behalf of the Organisation of Islamic Cooperation, and reiterated its long-standing demand for the removal of the blockade on Gaza.

He also called for the lifting of the limitations on movement of UNRWA personnel and goods in the West Bank and the Gaza Strip, which undermined the Agency's ability to fulfil its responsibilities to the Palestinian refugees. Malaysia also was very concerned about the humanitarian situation in Syria, including the living conditions of the 460,000 Palestinian refugees being helped by UNRWA. Many of them had been displaced two times and the Agency's important work in Syria deserved the international community's full support. In addition, the long-standing shortfall in the Agency's regular budget needed to be addressed. Malaysia, as a non-traditional donor, remained fully committed to providing assistance to the Palestinian people through regular and one-off contributions to UNRWA. The Malaysian private sector and civil society also strongly supported the cause of the Palestinian people and the Agency's work.

ASSAROF SASANAKUL ( Thailand ) said his country had a long tradition of supporting those in dire need of humanitarian assistance, consistently making financial contributions to UNRWA since 1978. This year, the Government had increased its annual contribution to the Agency to \$40,000. It also offered a series of academic and technical training programmes tailored to the specific needs of the Palestinian people. Citing the escalated danger in the Gaza Strip, he called for an end to hostilities and urged all sides to exercise restraints. Billions of dollars would be required for the reconstruction of Gaza. His Government had contributed \$100,000 to UNRWA's flash appeal for Gaza and decided recently to make an additional contribution of \$100,000 to the Palestine Red Crescent Society.

GRETA GUNNARSDOTTIR ( Iceland ) said UNRWA continued to carry out exceptional work in very challenging circumstances in the interests of the five million Palestinian refugees, and reaffirmed her country's support to the Agency. The situation of Palestine refugees in Syria was extreme, with many experiencing the trauma of dispossession and displacement for the second time. Parties to the conflict, especially the Syrian Government, must fully implement Council Resolutions 2139 (2014) and 2165 (2014). In the wake of the destruction wreaked on Gaza by the Israeli Defence Forces in response to the pointless and indiscriminate rocket attacks by elements there, the immediate priority for UNRWA was reconstruction. That would depend on getting the necessary materials into Gaza as well as on security and clearing sites of unexploded ordnance remaining from Israeli attacks. Israel should promptly facilitate access to those materials as well as open up exports from Gaza in order to revive the Palestinian economy. In the West Bank, Palestinian refugees continued to suffer under the ills of the occupation, including increasing violence and an increasing number of incursions by the Israeli security forces into Palestinian refugee camps. Pending a just and lasting solution, the international community must reaffirm its commitment to Palestinian refugees through UNRWA.

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