

Seasonal Suffering

This has become an annual feature: come monsoon, come an added dose of congestion to city's clogged, traffic-laden roads. Indiscriminate digging of city's arterial routes for one reason or the other would eat up the passage for Dhaka's highly heterogeneous traffic every year so much so that the whole city would wear the look of a traffic bedlam of sorts. As far as we are concerned this recurrent phenomenon is not an irremediable problem rather it is being kept alive from a definite corrupt inclination. Every year at about this time there is a great rush for spending the government budget and prepare for the sanctions of the new fiscal. Racing with the clock for utilisation of the fund, the authorities indulge in a flurry of activities that do justice neither to their professed concern for better urban management nor to the idea of reducing government expenditure. The result is obvious. No work is done properly and completely. Whether it is about installing underground storm sewer or new telephone cables, city-dwellers never really have the reprieve from their annual share of torture.

Lack of coordination, the common problem with all state-run fields is definitely one of the culprits here. But the reason projects are not taken up in a planned way for a timely one-off settlement is the prospect of windfall for certain quarters that lies hidden in the last-minute overdrive for utilisation of funds. A strong vested interest group which includes all sorts of people starting from government officials to contractors has developed around these public service funds and people's suffering continues from one year to another with no sign of a durable solution to the perennial problems. We demand that the government take some steps immediately to stop this manipulative exercise with public money. Although the problem has not gone totally unheeded with different government agencies and bodies getting into the act synchronising the affair, the concern registered so far has been essentially bureaucratic in nature and lacked seriousness.

We suggest the matter be taken up in the parliament and some sort of mechanism evolved for a change in the scenario. It really forms a sad commentary on our elected representatives' sensitivity towards public welfare that they hardly invest their time or talent in these issues at the parliament.

Perfidy on Nigerian People

This reeks of deep-seated conspiracy, no matter how it is sought to be passed off — act by act, sequence by sequence. The sudden death of Nigerian democratic icon Abiola, jailed since his winning the 1993 presidential election, in circumstances that can at best be described as mysterious and at worst diabolically conspiratorial, has stupefied the world beyond measure. Apparently he felt suddenly unwell in a meeting with a US delegation which was supposedly negotiating his release against speculations that he might have, under duress, agreed to a renunciation of his presidential mandate as the price for being set free by General Abubakar. UN Secretary-General Kofi Annan's visit earlier on had set the ball rolling for what looked like his imminent release from gaol.

Anyway, after falling sick he had 'cardiac arrest' and copy-book vomiting before he purportedly breathed his last. Family sources have put down the 'vomiting' to poisoning but even before any furore raged over his death, the authorities promptly promised its confirmation through a post mortem which, under the peculiar circumstances of Nigeria, could not be above the suspicion of doctoring. If, for the lack of any concrete evidence to the contrary, Abiola's death has to be accepted as 'natural' even then the responsibility for it must be borne by the military authorities because it is in their custody that he died. Moreover, only the other day when Kofi Annan visited Lagos Abiola was seen in excellent health and fine shape.

General Abubakar has practically stepped into the shoes of despotic military ruler Abacha who incidentally also died of 'cardiac arrest' not so long ago. He is desperately trying to strike a power-sharing deal with the dissidents, so it seems increasingly. The whole enterprise seems to revolve round one single refractory individual. The world must beware of him and ensure that he reads the writing on the wall. Abiola has died a martyr in the path of democracy. The tryst with destiny cannot be too far away for the Nigerians.

Flash Floods

Chittagong is first to report monsoon mischief this year. After a prolonged hot and humid spell that ravaged the country as never before, rainy season hardly set in when quite a few areas in the southeastern hilly region of the country have been inundated. Incessant rain coupled with excess flow of water in the rivers has led to these flash floods. Dhaka-Cox's Bazaar road link has been snapped. The situation seems to be quite serious in Bandarban where drinking water supply has been disrupted with water pumps having gone under flood water. In Lama more than two lakh people are reported to have been marooned. People are being forced to use flood water for consumption. Outbreak of diarrhoea as an epidemic seems to be on the cards. This calls for emergency succour. The authorities should ensure that potable water and dry food reach the flood stricken people as soon as possible.

Being a rehabilitation region that has recently seen the end of a long legacy of blood and unrest, Chittagong Hill Tracts, it goes without saying, deserves special care in a crisis situation like this. People who like to fish in troubled waters may make use of this natural adversity and indulge in activities and campaigns that may aggravate sufferings. Already reports have filtered through that extortionists are demanding money from folks saying that the peace accord has an effect on the land not in water. We are wary of the possibility that these 'bugs' might step up their illegal and tyrannical activities to add to the miseries of people in the submerged areas. Eagle-eyed vigilance along with quick despatch of relief material is what we expect from the government.

Post Nuclear Scenario in South Asia

Role of Mediation

The most recent report of possible negotiations next week between representatives of India and Pakistan in Washington, at the behest of the US State Department, augurs well as a good beginning. The forthcoming SAARC summit will also provide a suitable venue for a continued dialogue.

DETONATION of a nuclear device by India and Pakistan a few weeks ago raised a high pitch of jubilation in both the countries and caused a suppressed or morose reaction, albeit an adverse one with varying concern, among their neighbours. The international community, specially the western members, condemned it severely. Some of the big powers imposed sanction on the two, viewing them as recalcitrant. The uneasy stability prevalent in the sub-continent became more uneasy and, as a result, tension mounted.

The just concluded India-Bangladesh Dialogue, an unofficial forum consisting of think tanks of both the countries, held its 3-day long 6th session in Dhaka and discussed thread bare this issue. The Indian team comprised some renowned stalwarts like the former Prime Minister Inder Kumar Gujral, former Defence Minister KC Pant and Chairman of the Foreign Policy Cell of the BJP NN Uha. It was interesting to listen to their evaluation of the pre and post nuclear scenario of the region.

Gujral, propounder of the so-called Gujral Doctrine which is based mainly on the imperatives of good neighbourly relations, evaded deliberately and skirted skilfully the question about Indian compulsion for exploding nuclear device first and ahead of Pakistan. Yet, in his public address at the Sheraton on the 30th June and in his answer to questions that followed impressions gained ground that he did not fully subscribe to the BJP decision for explosion. The matter was never raised in the Parliamentary Committee on Foreign Affairs of which Gujral was Chairman and still he is. One gathers it was not also discussed and accorded prior approval by the cabinet. Gujral was known to have been a pacifist in his earlier days and reported to have participated in anti-nuclear demonstrations, hence his being, though marginally, out of tune with the rest of the Indian participants justifying their government's action.

The Indians advanced basically three sets of arguments. Firstly, they pointed out the inherent policy of discrimination exercised by the monopolistic nuclear club, the P-5, in their bid to keep it restricted to themselves. That is why they insisted on the non-nuclear members to sign the NPT, the Nuclear Non-proliferation Treaty, and in similar vein but at a higher level the CTBT, the Controlled Test Ban Treaty. Though the P-5 wanted the rest of the world to sign the treaties, their unspecified but real targets, however, were developing countries like India, Pakistan, Brazil, Argentina, etc. who were on the verge of entering the nuclear threshold. Indian stand had been that the P-5, while urging others to shun nuclear tests, themselves have been sitting tight on their nuclear stockpiles, without making even a lip service to the world-wide demand for nuclear disarmament. India wanted to break this nuclear monopoly of the privileged few by entering the Club herself.

Secondly, India is the second largest country of the world, nurturing one fifth of human population and enjoying the status of the largest democracy on earth. Despite being plagued with some of the darkest and deepest areas of poverty and backwardness, she equals and even excels many of the rich and the advanced nations in several other fields. The rising tide of ultranationalism in India at whose crest rides the ruling Bharatiya Janata Party has, of late, rekindled hopes of many to re-establish the ancient glory of India and to secure for her what is thought to be the legitimate right in the comity of nations, a place in the sun. Indians take immense pride at the success story of her nuclear scientists, who accomplished the feat unaided.

One of the casualties of India's nuclear adventure, however, besides foreign aid, may be, contrary to some expectations, her bid for a permanent seat in the Security Council.

Finally, perhaps the most ostensible explanation given by the Indian government in support of the action was their perception of security threat.

Such threat is generally earmarked coming from across the western and northern borders, from Pakistan and China. The apprehension of Pakistan acting as a maverick to embark upon a nuclear adventure after a full-scale development, though could not be ruled out entirely by some, was an event most unlikely to happen, for various reasons. Before taking a suicidal decision of this nature, Pakistan had to take into account possible preemptive action or prompt retaliatory measures that could be taken by India.

As for a possible threat from the north, one must be candid in drawing one's conclusion by observing the evolving policy and actions of China in the past decades. These hardly suggest any deterioration of her relations with India. On the contrary, Sino-Indian relations have been on the ascendancy in the recent past, as viewed by political observers, on account of positive steps like increased exchange of visits and off and on boundary negotiations between the two countries. The Chinese policy towards the sub-continent no longer has the same intense tilt in favour of Pakistan and is directed to establish a relatively balanced attitude to the countries of the region. Mr Pant observed that determination of the nature and magnitude of security perception constituted sovereign right of a nation. It is true, no doubt, but at the same time it is also true that other nations have the right to make their own evaluation of a situation in a particular region at a particular time.

The generally united stand of the Indian delegates was not shared by most on the Bangladesh side. However, strong Indian arguments may have been, it still remains difficult for India's neighbours to agree and to sleep in peace with nuclear bombs ticking by the bedside. Despite the inherent risk element due specially to the emotive nature of sub-continent people, Pakistan's nuclear blasts came somewhat as a relief to many. It helped realise Pakistan's changing security requirements and to restore the so-called balance of power in the region by way of eliminating the possibility of a nuclear black-mail.

However, all agreed that the imperative needs of the day were to consider how to contain the situation and avoid danger of escalation. A bright silver lining around the dark cloud, however, has been perceived by the willingness of both India and Pakistan to discuss the issue. Though the perennial Kashmir problem threatens to throw a spanner in the wheel, the positive overtures of both countries to discuss the current issue, and possibly to agree on a moratorium and CTBT, has been warmly welcomed by all. The possibility of a non-aggression treaty and an agreement against first use of nuclear weapons has provided a congenial atmosphere for initiating talks.

The most recent report of possible negotiations next week between representatives of the two governments in Washington, at the behest of the US State Department, augurs well as a good beginning. The forthcoming SAARC summit will also provide a suitable venue for a continued dialogue.

In this scenario, the attempt by the government of Bangladesh to use its good offices for reducing tension and to establish dialogues between India and Pakistan, was at first sight welcomed by many as a friendly and neighbourly act of a good Samaritan. Prime Minister also made brief shuttles to the two capitals. But to what effect? She came back wiser about the respective positions of the two countries on the issue and yielded the impression of having recognised soundness of the arguments of both. It was an exercise in futility. Gujral repeatedly made it clear during his stay in Dhaka that a third party mediation would not yield the desired result. One may still argue against it and cite the instance of the proposed negotiations in Washington. But there is a difference, a stark and wide contrast, between the two. And one would be too naive to spell it out.



Currents and Crosscurrents

by M M Rezaul Karim

From Bridge to Barrage

Cooperation of the upper riparian country is now clearly established with the signing of the Ganges water treaty. We should now proceed with the negotiations covering eastern rivers. We may consider Brahmaputra River Basin Development as an inter-country initiative for development of land and water resources of one of the poorest regions of the world.

I come from the village Mirzapur, Atwari Thana, located very close to Tetulia at the northern tip of Bangladesh. It should therefore be obvious that my own personal appreciation for the Bangabandhu Bridge is simply boundless. Around 200 persons of my village now reside in Dhaka. We plan to hire buses and travel to Mirzapur. We will celebrate the historic opening in our own personal way.

Until 1996, I had extensively traveled all over South-east and East Asia. Except for inter-island ferry boats in Indonesia and the Philippines or off shore islands elsewhere, I never came across ferry crossing on any major national highway. There are more than a dozen bridges across Chao Phya river, cutting across urban metropolitan area of Bangkok. In Europe, practically all major cities are located beside a river and numerous bridges enabled the cities to develop on both sides of rivers.

In Bangladesh, rivers constitute the biggest physical constraint for development. The bridge across Jamuna is perhaps the first big hurdle we have overcome so far. Next should be the Padma Bridge for a quick access to Khulna from Dhaka and then the Rupsha bridge would open the second port of Bangladesh to north-eastern states of India, Bhutan and Nepal. With the completion of the road bridge at Paksey, the nation would be effectively circled by a no-ferry highway network. This leaves the Bhairab bridge across Meghna to establish a complete national highway infrastructure.

The quality of the road infrastructure is of considerable importance. Traffic is increasing every day. If 4,000 vehicles are crossing the Bangabandhu Bridge today, very soon it would be 10,000. But the road between Dhaka and the Bridge is highly inadequate. Its widening including wider bridges could not be finished with completion of Bangabandhu Bridge. It's clearly an example of bureaucratic mismanagement and there being no accountability for such gross blunders, no one is bothered. On account of inefficiency, nobody ever loses a job in the government.

However, the purpose of writing to day is not the historic link, or uniting of the nation as a result of the 4.8 kilometer long, 11th longest bridge of the world. Like volumes of monsoon water that have passed beneath the bridge, much has been written and spoken on the subject already. It is therefore surprising that in all these volumes of speeches and writings, a significant issue has been conspicuously missing.

We all know that river training, the control of the flow of Jamuna within the designated channel under the bridge, was not only a much more complex engineering task that was accomplished, total expenditure on this account was considerably higher than the actual cost of construction of the bridge itself. In addition, maintaining the river channel will be a continuing work and every year a substantial portion of the revenue from the bridge will have to be devoted for this purpose.

Training the mighty river is an enormous task. It was not possible in the past in course of flood or erosion control projects on the same river on a smaller scale. At the same time, it is obvious that such successful river training for the purpose of flood and erosion control, drainage and irrigation constitutes the fundamental infrastructure for intensive irrigated agriculture, fresh water fishery and river borne cargo transportation to flourish in one of the largest river deltas of the world. It may now be recalled that long before the bridge across Jamuna was conceived, the proposal for the Brahmaputra Barrage was proposed as early as 1950s, which would have automatically created the benefits of a bridge as well. However, given the enormity of the task, lack of goodwill of the government of that time and above all, non-cooperation with the upper riparian country cre-

ated a hostile environment militating against the promotion of such a huge project.

The situation has now totally reversed. First, the river training associated with Bangabandhu Bridge should give rise to the vital technology for the next phase development after the bridge on the mighty river. Why not the barrage now? It would result in millions of hectares under three crops every year instead of one uncertain crop on the vast low lying flood plains. The of three Gorges Dam in China on the Yantze river (which is mightier than Jamuna) is an ideal example in front of us. The essential construction material, hard rocks, are available at nearby Madhyapara Mines — easily transportable by the railways. Limestone can be brought from Meghalaya to produce enormous quantity of cement that would be consumed. The other substantial raw material, steel, can be produced with Indian iron ore and our own natural gas.

In fact, the developed area centering on the bridge on both the right and left banks of Jamuna river should be earmarked for large scale heavy industries like cement, steel, petrochemicals and concrete products. An important source of demand will be the river development schemes. As intensification of cropping takes place in the protected low lands, demand for irrigation equipment, power tillers, processing equipment and machinery would increase many fold. This should then create the basis for modern engineering industries in and

around the Bangabandhu Bridge area. The first is the issue of the mighty river development. Since the techniques of river channel maintenance have now been developed, will it be possible to construct water intake points and distribute the dry months' flows through existing network of innumerable channels, big or small, for facilitating low-lift pump irrigation on a vast scale? Is it possible to prevent river erosion at critical points along the river? Is it possible to retain the excess monsoon flows through water control structures on the subsidiary channels or, if feasible, through construction of the dream barrage across the river Jamuna itself? Lastly, total flood prevention through expensive embankment construction is out of date. We need the flood for the valuable silt and spawning of fresh water fishes on the low lands. However, it is possible to contain the floods to reasonable levels in years of normal flows through better drainage? How about low cost dredging so as to enhance the carrying capacity of rivers along with their tributaries?

There are numerous planning and design issues to be dealt with and it is not going to be a one-project affair. The basic strategy of development should be worked out first. We may begin with small to medium scale initiatives for better irrigation and drainage along with intensive rural aquaculture, in areas close to the Bangabandhu Bridge and also plan for the industrial programme with active participation of the private sector. Gradually, bigger projects may be undertaken — culminating in the construction of the barrage across the main river.

The impediments of the past do not exist any longer. The lack of goodwill of the Government of Bangladesh is out of question. Similarly, cooperation of the upper riparian country is now clearly established with the signing of the Ganges water treaty. We should now proceed with the negotiations covering eastern rivers. We may consider Brahmaputra River Basin Development as an inter-country initiative for development of land and water resources of one of the poorest regions of the world. It is a grand opportunity for integrated regional development for which we need determination, vision and solid hard work.

However, if we could have the Bangabandhu Bridge today, why not the Brahmaputra Barrage in the future?



Window on Asia

Shahed Laff

To the Editor...

Letters for publication in these columns should be addressed to the Editor and legibly written or typed with double space. For reasons of space, short letters are preferred, and all are subject to editing and cuts. Pseudonyms are accepted. However, all communications must bear the writer's real name, signature and address.

Nuclear race in South East Asia

Sir, Are we so dumb? Have we forgotten everything? Are we so eager to kill ourselves? For what? Arms supremacy? Are the Indians so eager to dominate rather than be dominated? Are the Pakistanis so scared of being squashed?

We being the poorest country within the sub-continent, are proud to have their 'mini-powers' as our neighbours. From time to time we get technical and monetary aid from them. But when our neighbours are at each other's throat, then what are we to do? Are we to stay back and witness this game-of-death, and risk ourselves by getting blown up? Or are we to protest and risk our aid, in which they won't care less to what we say?

Presenting monetary aid to these foolish, 'Arms-crazy' nations will prove nothing. And the world is also scared to use stern measures. Does this mean this is the beginning of a mass scale nuclear race? Then all I can say is — God help us all.

Shagor
 Dhaka

Technology

Sir, We had an opportunity to read an article written by Dr Mohd Yunus in your Focus page titled 'Should we ride the wave... or pick up the crumbs' dated 29th June, 1998. It was an interesting read. But its importance is immense. He has aptly described the importance of modern technology as literature. We cannot but repeat his points:

- 1) Imagination is the greatest power.
- 2) No botheration of expenditure.
- 3) Passing through the critical part of the long way.
- 4) Tomorrow's Bill Gates.
- 5) New technology, new

Renaming after great names

Sir, The government has been renaming many places/establishments/structures after the names of some famous personalities. Through such renaming (Sher-e-Banglanagar, Zia, Ershad Nagar etc.) had been taken place during all the previous governments, yet I find one place/area of great national significance was being left out, since liberation. I feel, this place/area should be renamed during this government, as no multi-party government may likely to get such golden chance to do so in coming decades.

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M Ali
 Dhaka

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Father of the Nation was born and brought up. From there, he launched his movement to fulfill his dream of renaming a country for the Bengalis as — Bangladesh.

Firstly, in this context, the above two names of the mentioned places themselves don't sound elegant and befitting. Secondly and tragically, our beloved Bangabandhu has been laid to eternal rest. Thirdly, due to presence of tomb of the Father of the Nation, these names will be used for the visitors/visiting dignitaries and in text-books and other manuals/pamphlets. Fourthly, the present Prime Minister is the local MP of this area and at the same time, the worthy daughter of Bangabandhu.

Again, such combination would unlikely occur in ones, for a decision of such naming of these places. Moreover, over the last 25 years, none has even tried to glorify this area. Naming and renaming are being done in other zones, leaving the said significant area.

Thus, I would like to suggest for renaming Tungipara as Mujibpur or Mujibabad and Gopalganj as Bangabandhu Nagar.

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Culture of SOS?

Sir, Looks like the merry days are over. Foreign donors will be trimming their aid with the collapse of financial system in different parts of the world. Drive Pajeros on 3 wheels? (Yes, use our baby taxis or auto-rickshaws).

Serves us right — the rich helping the poor! The money comes from control through WTO, Watch Wall Street through the millennium.

A Z
 Dhaka

Day trip for tourists

Sir, By the grace of Allah the Bangabandhu Bridge has been opened on the 23rd June, 1998. It feels great for everyday who are visiting the bridge.

It is now necessary to arrange for regular AC and non-AC coach service between Dhaka and Bangabandhu

Bridge so that people can see the bridge at a reasonable cost. The coach service should have 'toilet facility' as at present there is no such facility en route this road. Passengers should be picked up from central coach stations of the city and dropped after the trip. The coaches should go up to the western side of the bridge and stay there for some time so that people can have a good look at the whole bridge. Snacks from reputable shops can be provided to the tourists with mineral water at a reasonable rate. While on the return trip, the coaches can stop at Tangail for about 10 minutes so that tourists can buy famous 'Tangail chomchoms'. The whole trip should take about 8 hours. Coaches may start from Dhaka at 7 am and return by about 3 to 4 pm.

I would request our Parjatan Corporation, tour operators and coach service providers to look into this proposal and make early arrangement for 'Day Trip to Bangabandhu Bridge' at a reasonable cost. This will help not only our countrymen but also the foreign tourists to see this magnificent bridge.

Local entrepreneurs should establish good hotels and motels at Tangail. Both ends of the bridge should have decent toilet facilities and ample space for parking.

Salina Haq
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Cruelty of house-owners

Sir, It is an urgent need for the formation of Tenants' Association in order to ensure security and safety of the tenants who have no houses or apartments of their own in Dhaka. Some house-owners are said to be cruel, rude and dishonest in dealings with their tenants. We claim ourselves to be civilized and modern in life-style. But the trend of some people's behaviour is shocking and unspeakable. I have no word to express my anguish and distress on this account.

In France and England there are organisations to protect the interests of the tenants with

very small amount of money. I strongly feel that this sort of organisation is to be established as soon as possible to protect the interests of the tenants and in particular the retired people living in the rented houses or apartments in Dhaka.

I also feel that the government would support the idea of forming such an organisation to make the tenants' life secure against the evil designs of some of the house-owners and apartment buildings as per the law of the land.

Abul Ashraf Noor
 Uttara, Dhaka

Armed Forces and National Security

Sir, Our armed forces are some of the very few institutions of our country we can genuinely feel proud of. Not only they spearheaded our liberation struggle but they have also brought laurels for us from abroad and earned widespread admiration. Sadly there is an alienation of our professional military services with the rest of the society because uninhibited discussion about the armed forces in the civil society is almost a taboo. But this is not a sign of a healthy democracy. We feel that we have come a long way since those martial law days when the armed forces were the masters not servitors of the republic. The much hyped excuse for this near prohibition is that public discussion of our defence capability will compromise our national security. Any well informed citizen knows how ridiculous this claim is. Modern international defence publications provide accurate information of every nation's defence capability. They also inform the readers of every international arms transaction. In the media not only the strategical concerns of the nations are open for discussion, but individual tactical doctrines are scrutinized. Thriving civilian defense think tanks are a common feature among modern states even around our neighbourhood. India, Pakistan, Sri Lanka have defense experts whose opinion are sought and valued.

We now have around us two nuclear powers whose mutual

relation is anything but cordial. Actualization of our worst nightmare is not a farfetched possibility. The citizens have the right to know our defense capabilities and shortcomings. They also need to know how our strategic limitations can be overcome with pragmatic policy. National security has become crucial for us now. Our policymakers should know the timeless Latin adage, 'si vis pacem, para bellum' (if you want peace, prepare for the worst)!

Shafiqur Rahman
 4th year Dept of Mechanical Engineering BUET

Attracting foreign investment

Sir, We have critically and thoughtfully observed that each and every government which has been in power in our country for the last fifteen to ten years has been keenly interested in attracting foreign investment in our country.

In this connection we would like to state that former President H M Ershad failed to secure any pass marks on the subject as his government was a military and autocratic one.

Former Prime Minister Begum Khaleda Zia could not achieve any real progress in the matter due to continuous strikes, hartals and non-cooperation movement by the opposition Awami League.

And now when the Awami League is in power load-shedding and electricity failures, water supply crisis, huge traffic jams, hijacking, red tapism and deteriorating law and order situation are creating bottlenecks in the way of foreign investment.

We the common people wonder how and when we would be able to create good impression on the foreign investors and when we would be successful in attracting foreign investment in our country in the true sense of the term.

Charity begins at home. Let us all form a consensus and create good ground for attracting foreign investment in our country.

O. H. Kabir
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