

Stop Hartal, Please

THE BNP-led opposition has decided to call a hartal on December 5 and 6 brandishing its one-point demand for the resignation of AL government to pave way for early general elections. But why? In the past, the AL-led opposition with the same JP and Jamaat as partners could not force BNP government to resign even a day earlier than their term. That was so in spite of 173 days of hartal and mass resignation of MPs from parliament. At present also BNP — ironically with the same partners — will not be able to force AL to resign. What has become a plaything for the opposition has turned out to be a nightmare for millions of people living below the poverty line. We have criticised hartals in the past, we are doing it now and will do so in future irrespective of the identity, power and strength of the callers. This paper once again strongly protests the decision of the combined opposition to go for hartal yet again. The country had just suffered six days of hartal only in the last month, yet the leaders felt that the cup of misery of the people ought to be full to the brim. They are making the people suffer on whose support they are banking to return to power. It is suicidal to fail to read the pulse of common people.

The largest opposition in parliament has also confused the whole process of agitation against the government as they tried to follow the strategy they had used against the autocratic regime of Ershad. They have mixed up a usurper of power with an elected leader. Hence the one-point demand has not so far found public support. But the opposition could have embarrassed the government had they chosen to go by issue-based agitation. And there is no dearth of issues being offered by the AL government all the time. Instead, the BNP and its allies have been playing the 'cracked gramophone' record over and over again much to the chagrin of the public and delight of the ruling party.

Once again we urge the combined opposition to shun the course of hartal and offer more interesting and imaginative alternatives to people for the sake of positive opinion building about the opposition leadership. They should go back to the parliament. Let the movement be both inside and outside the House.

Cut Systems Loss

THE Asian Development Bank's (ADB) prescription to make the Dhaka Electric Supply Authority (DESA) "financially viable" through reduction of systems loss to 18 per cent from the existing 25 per cent "without resorting to a power hike" strikes a responsive chord in us. In our reaction to the energy ministry's mooted reforms (Power Tariff, September 18), we strongly urged the authorities to put more accent on ensuring transparency and strict financial management rather than considering the tariff increase option. We have also voiced our apprehension that "until and unless systemic inadequacy is eliminated, the (power) sector would continue to reel under the burden of colossal losses." Besides, our development partners, especially the World Bank, have also expressed, in no uncertain terms, their dissatisfaction over the total systemic disarray.

It is a truism that our power sector has become a burden on the government. Each day it is counting the loss in millions of taka despite a series of measures to reverse the trend. There have been attempts at decentralisation of distribution authorities to enhance the sector's performance, leading to the creation of state-controlled DESA and recently the private-ownership DESCO, and leaving the Power Development Board (PDB) only to deal with power generation. However, nothing seemed to have had any dramatic impact. Despite some increased generation, the distribution front has been bothersome. Leakage from dilapidated transmission network aside, pilferage in the shape of illegal connection, obviously orchestrated by some unscrupulous low-level power employees, has wrought havoc on the entire system. To make matters worse, there has been failure in bill collection, another breeding ground for corruption. Until recently, DESA owed PDB some 50 billion taka.

Therefore, stringent administrative measures aimed to eliminate corruption and ensure strict financial management hold the key for making not only DESA but also the entire power supply system efficient and profit-making. Tariff hike from time to time certainly is not the answer.

Biman's Hiccup

THE refusal of Biman pilots to navigate scheduled flights on Wednesday seems to have a point about it. But this certainly led to a serious disruption in the flight timetable causing a great misery to passengers.

The overworked pilots are often forced to operate without the mandatory rest for two days stipulated in their charter of agreement with the Biman. Biman's indifferent attitude to its fliers who have been working under severe pressure, always performing extra duty, is difficult to condone. Moreover there has been a delay on the management's part in renewing contracts with the pilots.

Now taking Biman's chequered history into account, it is assumed that a mere signing of the MOU may not bring a permanent solution to the problem. The management of the national flag carrier needs to review its strategy in recruiting pilots for its very few aircraft. Along with other anomalies, the authorities are also expected to make it public as to why some trained pilots were grounded lately without any explicit reason. This no doubt is unfortunate.

At any rate, the management needs to ensure mandatory rest for long-distance pilots to avoid catastrophe in the air. The purchasers of Biman's services do not expect this situation to crop up in future.

Democracy is the Only Path, but Leaders Must Deliver

by Dr Ahmed Badruzzaman

There is no alternative to a "government of the people, for the people, and by the people." We have overcome the mighty British and beaten back the Pakistani hordes. It is time that we put our own demons to rest and move on as a nation. THE ALTERNATIVE IS TOO CHILLING TO CONSIDER!

THE recent coup d'état in Pakistan seems to have drawn parallels between the current political situation in Bangladesh and the days preceding the Pakistani coup. News reports in Dhaka, including those in The Daily Star, have carried the "good news" of corrupt political leaders in Pakistan being hauled to jail, banned for 21-year from politics, and millions of dollars in defaulted loans being recovered. Some have cheered on the prospect of deposed Prime Minister, Mr. Nawaz Sharif, facing a possible sentence of death for his crime of trying to prevent the would-be coup leader's plane from landing back in Pakistan. A bomb blast, allegedly by Sharif supporters, has killed many. Utterly frustrated by the events in their beloved homeland, some Bangladeshis have expressed support, either privately or in public, for similar "brave steps" in Bangladesh. In a recent internet posting in the US, a correspondent opined that he will be happy the day Bangladesh political leaders of various parties and "all their associates are plunged into the jail and sentenced to HANG TILL DEATH." Tough words indeed and very worrisome, not only for the politicians but also for the country itself.

I share the frustrations of this and other correspondents at the state of affairs in our homeland, but I STRONGLY disagree with the remedy of a coup d'état. True, the political establishment is near bankrupt, politicians of all shades are corrupt or inept, or both. A handful of the privileged have gotten rich by plundering from the banks and the citizenry. There is misery everywhere. But

a coup d'état is not the answer and here are a few reasons why: • NO ONE, not even the founder of a country or the commander of the armed forces, has the right to change an elected government by force, no matter what the intent or provocation are. In civilized society, the people through their elected leaders are supreme. No one is above the law. The legendary Gen. McArthur was dismissed by President Truman at the end of the Second World War, when it appeared that he might be reaching beyond his command. But such traditions do not belong to the West alone. Remember Khalid bin-Walid right before the battle of Yarmuk? He was dismissed by the Khalifa Omar. Khalid handed over the command without rancor and then led the Muslim army to a brilliant victory. He could have led a rebellion — he was popular and the most brilliant military strategist of his time but he did not. To him the nation was more important than his personal glory — the Khalifa was the chosen civilian leader.

• The statements by the new Pakistani military dictator do not sound much different from the late Field Marshal Ayub Khan, Gen. Yahya Khan, Gen. Ziaur Rahman, Gen. Zia-ul-Haq, Gen. Ershad, Gen. Abacha of Nigeria, Gen. Pinochet Chile, and many others, when they took over to "save the nation." They sound good, especially to a

nation that is barely surviving. The military folks come in, make a few changes, order everyone to be good and honest, and issue edicts such as walking on a certain side of the road, or set low prices for essentials. Things look good for a while — any change gets the old system disorganized for sometime — and then either these do-gooders or their cronies set up their own patronage system. This scenario is yet to fail. You only need to go back to Ershad's rule or look at Myanmar next door. Or, consider what happened to Nigeria under the military that had taken over using about the same words as Gen. Musharraf did in Pakistan. One of Africa's richest, with an abundant petroleum reserve, Nigeria is in shambles and has begun a slow recovery after the recent democratic election.

Assurances by a military dictator, such as those by the new Pakistani ruler, of letting judiciary and fundamental rights function are hollow. Ask him whether he will quit if the courts rule the coup d'état unconstitutional, better yet, ask him if he will let the question be even asked in courts or in the streets.

• Three major ingredients are needed to survive and prosper as a nation. These are: 1) an agreed upon system of governance, 2) a leadership, qualified and dedicated to make it work honestly and effectively, and 3) a populace that is at least aware

of their rights AND responsibilities, and has a sense of ownership in the process. Military rule offers no system — pulling out a gun or flogging people is not a system. The military no doubt have dedicated folks but they are seldom qualified to make a political system of compromise, concern, and compassion work. They rob the populace of their right of choice and dissent, and they do not allow the people any sense of responsibility and ownership.

Bangladesh does have an agreed upon system — it is our Constitution written with the blood of millions. Our leadership may be of poor quality and generally corrupt/inept, but unless we let the system work, we will not get the changes we desire. Ayub Khan short-circuited it in 1958 and we continue to pay the price. Our populace is politically motivated but get aroused easily due to lack of education, daily struggles of life, and lack of a feeling of ownership. With time and effort those can be overcome but NOT with an agreed upon system. Military dictatorships do not offer that.

• Previous attempts even in civilian dictatorships have failed, both politically and economically. Remember the much-vaunted Soviet system or even the BAKSAL rule imposed in Bangladesh in 1975 by Sheikh Mujib? Even in Western Europe, countries with dictatorship have lagged far behind.

Spain and Portugal, now democracies, are taking years to overcome the effects of long running dictatorships and emerge from the status of being the poorest countries in Western Europe. Even Italy, a parliamentary democracy, with its fabled government turnover rate, more than one a year by some count, has done better economically.

Democracy is far from perfect, but with it one comes closest to a system of participatory, consensual government. Military dictatorships, or any dictatorship for that matter, do not offer "brave steps." In the long run they set a nation back. They may be well-intentioned but often they are composed of people who are ill-equipped to lead a diverse nation of individuals and groups that need less barking of orders and more attempts at persuasion, compromise, concern, and compassion.

Groups, military or civilian, that usurp an elected leadership are fundamentally traitors — no matter what they say. Elected leaders who loot the country are traitors too but there is a defined system to deal with them. It took millions of lives to get rid of the Pakistani military dictatorship imposed on us. It took more lives to get rid of Ershad and his clique. It is time to move ahead rather than keep trying to establish an agreed upon political system. We have one. Let us make it work. Without that, we cannot

make the economic progress we all desire. To their credit, the patriotic Bangladeshi armed forces appear to have recognized this and thus have refrained from actions of the past, despite serious shortcomings in the implementation of current political system.

Having argued against a military take over, however, I will be remiss if I do not STRONGLY urge the country's elected civilian leadership, both in the government and in the opposition, to get them act together and alter their course of tango to termination. A despairing and a desperate nation waits for them to deliver what they were elected for — economic advancement, social justice, societal peace, and national sovereignty. But for how long? Our people are tired of the bickering, the extra-constitutional activities in the name of political movements, the looting of the banks, the cronyism, the alleged official corruption, the violence, the environmental pollution, and the breakdown in law and order. Millions face death from drinking arsenic-contaminated tube well water. The level of frustration has reached a breaking point.

But dictatorship will not solve the problems. We have tried this and are worse off for it. There is no alternative to a "government of the people, for the people, and by the people." We have overcome the mighty British and beaten back the Pakistani hordes. It is time that we put our own demons to rest and move on as a nation. THE ALTERNATIVE IS TOO CHILLING TO CONSIDER!

The author is a Bangladeshi-born scientist and writes from Anaheim, California.

The Horror! The Horror!

by Mohammad Badrul Ahsan

Greed leads to mischief which leads to death. Greed is when one desires what one doesn't deserve and mischief is when one demands it. Death is when mischief fails to sustain greed and claims casually in that disruption. In short, we are talking about a grammar of catastrophe when unrestrained desire ends in dire consequences.

DEATH comes to this country in more than one way. It arrives through the trajectory of a bomb hurled by the nimble hand of a miscreant. If often travels from Los Angeles in the likeness of a friend with whom one has lived and done business for sixteen years. It insinuates itself in the sick humor of policemen who chase a youth to ditch and jeer him while he sinks in the muck. At times it erupts from the thick of blood, when, to avenge a dispute over a plot of land, a mother and her son and daughter are hacked to death by their kinsfolk.

At this point of time, nothing is more prolific than death in this country, which, in the words of English playwright Philip Massinger, has "thousand doors to let out life." How does one reconcile the day for the family of that trucker who left home for day's work to end up dead in a bomb attack? If one looked at his roasted corpse, laid on its back in a hospital stretcher, legs folded and arms poised die many times before their death, but death like this ought to make cowards amongst many of us.

Like most other things in life, death follows the law of large numbers, which means that the number of success increases as the number of experiment increases. But it is not the number of deaths, which is as deplorable as their nature.

Many primitive peoples, including those speaking Indo-European and Malayo-Polynesian languages, the early Chinese, and the American Indians, identified the life of man with his breath and believed that it was the union of breath with earth, which produced a living organism. When the Bangladesh-born US engineer lay dying his body thrashed to the ground by the impact of death, a witness standing nearby heard hissing sounds of breath going out of the victim's body as his lungs fell flat.

Charles De Gaulle, the great French statesman, said that what we think about death only mattered for what death made us think about life. If there is so much as a carnival of life going on in Bangladesh in our venture for capitalism, free market liberalism and promiscuous consumption, there is also a concurrent carnival of death around us when breath is snatched from earth in many rude ways. Between plethora of life and paroxysm of death there is a pandemonium of

perdition, which perpetuates the premonition of peril on the precipice of mind. If death is life sharpened to its end, we have turned life into a whetstone of fear and anxiety, which divides it in two while fiction.

The irony of this while thing is that the harder we work to embellish life the harder we embroil it. John Donne lamented in his poem Devotion Upon an Empty Cradle that "Every man's death diminishes him." In that sense, every murder is suicide turned outward as the killer diminishes in the act of taking another man's life. If serial killers like Ershad Shikdar and Laltu have killed again and again, it was because they were trapped in the increasing restlessness of their diminishing existence.

Anaxagoras, an Ionian philosopher, argued that everything contained some fire, but we only called it fire if that element preponderated. True, people die and get killed in other countries, but it is different in this country where it preponderates. If we must believe

in the fatalism of death, then a man came all the way from his newfound country to die in the fatal ecology of the old one.

And, that reminds us of Mr Kurtz in Joseph Conrad's Heart of Darkness, "a very successful company agent and explorer" who was a member of the 'gang of virtue', condemning slavery and barbaric customs. When Marlow arrives at Kinchasa, he finds Mr Kurtz already consumed by the savage forces of savagery, which he once hated. His lack of moral equipment and greed for money and power rendered him unable to cope with the forces of savagery and malevolence within him which the wilderness had brought out.

The common denominator amongst all killings is a terrible mischief that others must die so that one can live. That must be the ultimate greed, when life is used as fuel to burn its own fire. Miscreants who kill for money immolate themselves in that fire, while their conscience evaporates in the heat of greed. The policemen who wanted to squeeze a few

bucks out of a luckless youth didn't care that they had taken the matter too far. The nieces and nephews of a widow in Lalbagh didn't realize that three relatives could be more precious than a parcel of land. Greed chokes conscience like cholesterol chokes the arteries and creates a desperate state of spiritual arrest.

Nietzsche's Zarathustra referred to this aspect when he spoke to the crowd about the last man who, content with his happiness and unable to feel any sense of shame for being unable to rise above those wants, ceases to be human. According to Francis Fukuyama, this man will have dishwashers and VCRs and private automobiles, but still he will not be satisfied with himself. Because, "satisfaction, as opposed to happiness, arises not from the goal itself, but from the struggle and work along the way."

That only affirms the age-old adage that greed leads to mischief which leads to death. Greed is when one desires what one doesn't deserve and mis-

chief is when one demands it. Death is when mischief fails to sustain greed and claims casually in that disruption. In short, we are talking about a grammar of catastrophe when unrestrained desire ends in dire consequences. Marlow arrived in the heart of Darkness to find that Mr Kurtz had restrained in the cultivation of his various talents. In his amazement, he also realised that if anybody had any restraints at all, it was the most savage of all men, the half-starved cannibals who had restrained themselves from tucking into the pilgrims. It takes a man all his inborn strength to fight hunger properly," he exclaimed.

At the end of Joseph Conrad's novel, Mr Kurtz meets his death putting an end to his object, pleading, vile desires, meanness and the tempestuous anguish of his soul. He uttered four words in whispered cry, "The horror! The horror!" as if to express his final self-knowledge and victory cry to overcome the darkness of his deeply suppressed inner anarchy. In the course of death that surrounds us, we are also submerged in that grotesque anarchy suppressed within us. Perhaps we need to chant those words more often to put an end to our objectless desires, vile desires and tempestuous anguish without having any of us die in their devastation.

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.

Hospital wastes

Sir, Even at the end of the 20th century it seems that we are still confused about the best technologies to manage waste — particularly hospital wastes — which poses direct danger to health and well-being of the people. One of our main problems is management of solid waste. Dhaka city alone generates 3500 tons of solid waste. Out of this, 42 per cent is collected. Hospital waste is one of the toxic components of this solid waste and due to improper management of the hospital waste it is polluting the environment, affecting people's health by spreading infectious and communicable diseases.

As we all know, hospital waste is being disposed of on the streets and drains. Hospitals lack waste management system and don't have requisite technology or method for safe disposal of waste. The waste that is being generated from the hospitals is not separated or segregated before being disposed. The clinics that are mostly in residential areas are disposing of their waste into nearby DCC dustbins which are not regularly cleared and thus polluting the environment of the localities.

However, it has been learnt that many hospitals and government departments concerned are planning to install incinerators to manage the hospital waste. But the use of incinerator is being discouraged in many developed countries. It needs to be remembered that all technologies have their advantages and disadvantages and levels of pollution and environmental problems. In developed countries none of the hospitals disposes its waste the way we do; they use appropriate technologies to make sure the waste doesn't pollute the environment and affect the community. But when we are considering the ways of handling hospital waste management we should have the same standard, technologies and economic

condition to adopt their waste management procedure. Without looking into that we are fighting over the issue of using an incinerator or which technologies are the best.

The Department of Environment can determine a standard level of emitting fume from the incinerator and beyond that level the operation of the incinerator has to be stopped and the DoE has to specify alternatives. From an environmental point of view, our suggestion is, an incinerator can be used provided waste segregation is done at the source. The waste can be separated into infectious, non-infectious, pharmaceutical and chemical, highly infectious, kitchen waste, and sharp box. If we continue to practice segregation of waste before disposing it off into the incinerator, there would be less chance for bad fume, but if we dispose the "whole waste together (without segregation)" in an incinerator then the chance of emission of dioxin and bad fume would be rather high. The basic thing we should do first is to offer training to the persons who are handling the waste. When we have the opportunity to use an incinerator or some other modern technologies we should adopt and learn to use it.

We must not forget that some measures, even if not perfect, are certainly better than no measure at all. We should determine which option is better — the present practice of dumping hospital waste in open place or using incinerator as well as other alternatives?

Tabassum Dana
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Services Trust (BLAST), Dhaka

Roadside sale of petrol

Sir, A good number of roadside makeshift shops selling loose petrol to passing vehicles are seen along the Tongi-Dhaka

highway. These unauthorised sales are not only illegal but also pose hazard to public life and safety. The same thing is happening on other important roads of the city as well. The authority concerned ought to take appropriate actions to stop this. At the same time the gullible buyers should give it a second thought before getting adulterated fuel from these illegal sellers.

SA Kader
Dhaka

An ex-PM gets RI!

Sir, This seems to be a good, and revolutionary, piece of news in the press. One former prime minister of the country has been awarded 15 years' RI by the court. There is lot to think about without comment.

Abul M Ahmad
Dhaka

An ordinary citizen speaks

Sir, On her return from abroad after performing the umrah (she stopped there both ways during the trip), the Prime Minister is reported to have told the newsmen in Dhaka (DS, Nov 20), "Bangladesh is not Pakistan and still there are people in this country who open their umbrellas when it rains in Pakistan."

As an ordinary citizen, who cannot have access to inside information as any minister does, it is possible to point out broadly some areas where the negative conditions in our society, as noticed by the public, personally or through the mass media, is not dissimilar to that prevailing in an LDC country such as Pakistan as cultural and moral mores go up and down depending on the standard of the leadership.

The severe politicisation of most of the public institutions in the country (the list is too long to be included here). Every regime does it to some extent; why the present regime claims to be an exception? If remedial measures have been taken up by the government, these may be publicised for public information.

The erosion of the higher educational institutions. The details are well-known.

The vast legion of loan de-

faulters. Is the size that of a platoon, brigade or division strength? The insiders know the answer. What is being done to clear the deck, and what is the rate of success? No clear official answers are forthcoming.

Political victimisation. Any data released to the media? The present dismal law and order situation: Who supports it? How far the authority has been successful? Toll collection has become an institution. Who are collectively responsible for its flourishing, and for its elimination? Both agencies are the same!

The politicians cannot run the parliament. The rule of the regime in power is being watched (the Opposition have got enough publicity).

The moral breakdown of the society at practically all levels, right from the billionaires down to the level of the unemployed. Why this negative popularity of things not to do?

It would not be surprising if the bad grade of local politicians and other moral defaulters in Dhaka and elsewhere in the country try to put on protective umbrellas in self-defence from unwelcome attention. The state of affairs is neither secret nor unknown to the political leaders. The genesis of the evil deeds is reckoned to start from the politicians' camps, as they wield the maximum power and influence. In misdeeds, and misuse both, nonchalantly to the detriment of the nation. There are other examples, but it is enough to set the ball rolling, for a national debate on the issue raised by one of the leaders.

A Hussian
Dhaka

Air pollution in Dhaka city

Sir, A lot of news coverage and articles have appeared in the newspapers on air pollution. The authorities also appeared to have taken cognizance of the serious effect of air pollution with particular reference to the situation in Dhaka city. We were relieved to see the quick response of the government to tackle one of the most serious health hazards by taking decisions to ban import of 2-stroke auto-rickshaws and compulsory introduction of supplying lead-free fuel to au-

tomobiles. But it has been almost a year since the government took those decisions. All the sound and fury that we noticed at that time seem to have produced no result till date.

The government seems to have either forgotten or deliberately shelved the idea of implementing those decisions at the best of certain vested quarters. We now find more auto-rickshaws in the streets than before and the number is increasing every day. Was it then only a lip-service to stop public hue and cry?

The government of Nepal has recently banned auto-rickshaw with 2-stroke engines for its capital city in its effort to contain air pollution. Why couldn't the government of Bangladesh take similar decision for Dhaka city?

It is known to all that Dhaka city with a population of more than 8.5 million is now considered to be one of the most polluted cities in the world and its main source of pollution are the auto-rickshaws with 2-stroke engines. Every year 15,000 people, mostly children, die and many more suffer from various diseases because of air pollution only. We wonder how the government remains a silent spectator to human miseries of such magnitude.

Zahidur Rahman and Capt Hussian Imam
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DCC, DMP, traffic jam and accountability

Sir, In an open discussion held at National Press Club recently, Mayor Mohammad Hanif, on the one hand, has publicly confessed that about three lakh rickshaws are plying in Dhaka city against the total registration of eighty thousand. The DC Traffic Mushtaq Hossain on the other hand, has told the audience that about seven lakh rickshaws are plying on the city roads.

We are more interested in the controversy of number of rickshaws whether there are three lakh or seven lakh rickshaws plying on Dhaka city roads. We are simply interested to know as to what practical action or step the DCC or DMP has taken so far to save the city

dwellers from the ever increasing number of rickshaws, indiscriminate parking of buses, "U"-turn of buses, illegal occupation, encroachment, infringement, intrusion and trespass on public roads and streets.

In fact for the last few years the more we have been crying and seeking solution for road traffic jam the more and more the road traffic jam has been increasing by leaps and bounds. Our people's elected government is advocating accountability for judiciary and press, we wonder where is the accountability and transparency of DCC, DMP and road traffic jam?

O H Kabir
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Uncalled for

Sir, In the issue of The Daily Star dated 23.11.99 I was both shocked and amused at the same time to see that a writ petition had been moved against the campaign of the Voyage of Discovery. Are the people of our country so bored that they have to do such things as a means of passing time? Some may think that I am for all these western ideas but that would be absolutely wrong. Frankly speaking, when the advertisements of the Voyage of Discovery used to come on television, I was most happy to see that Bangladesh was also on the lists of the countries of visit. I thought finally Bangladesh is coming up on the international front. But as usual, people in our country tend to take things in a negative way. The anti-drug associations said that the campaign's aim was to encourage young people to smoke! Which world do these people live in? In this day and age everyone knows the hazards of smoking to see that a writ petition was also on the lists of the countries of visit. 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