

EU to lift sanctions against Cuba

AFP, Brussels

EU nations agreed Thursday to definitively lift their sanctions against Cuba, in the hope of encouraging democracy on the island, European diplomats said.

European Union foreign ministers took the decision in principle during dinner on the sidelines of an EU summit in Brussels.

"There was an agreement to lift the sanctions against Cuba," a European diplomatic source said.

"They have agreed to have an annual review and in one year's time to assess the political dia-

logue with Cuba," she added.

The move is a largely symbolic gesture as the sanctions, which restrict high-level diplomatic contacts and offer some symbolic support for dissidents, have been in suspension since 2005.

Sources with the Spanish delegation confirmed the move. Spain restored diplomatic relations with Havana last year and championed the move to get the sanctions lifted.

However Washington said it was "disappointed" by the EU decision favouring Cuba, which it said remains an authoritarian regime

despite recent reforms.

"We're disappointed in this decision. We think the Castros need to take a number of steps to improve the human rights conditions for ordinary Cubans before any sanctions are lifted," National Security Council spokesman Gordon Johndroes said.

"Certainly, I would hope that... any of our democratic friends and allies throughout the world would be cognizant of not taking actions that would appear to give additional legitimacy" to the Cuban regime, he said.

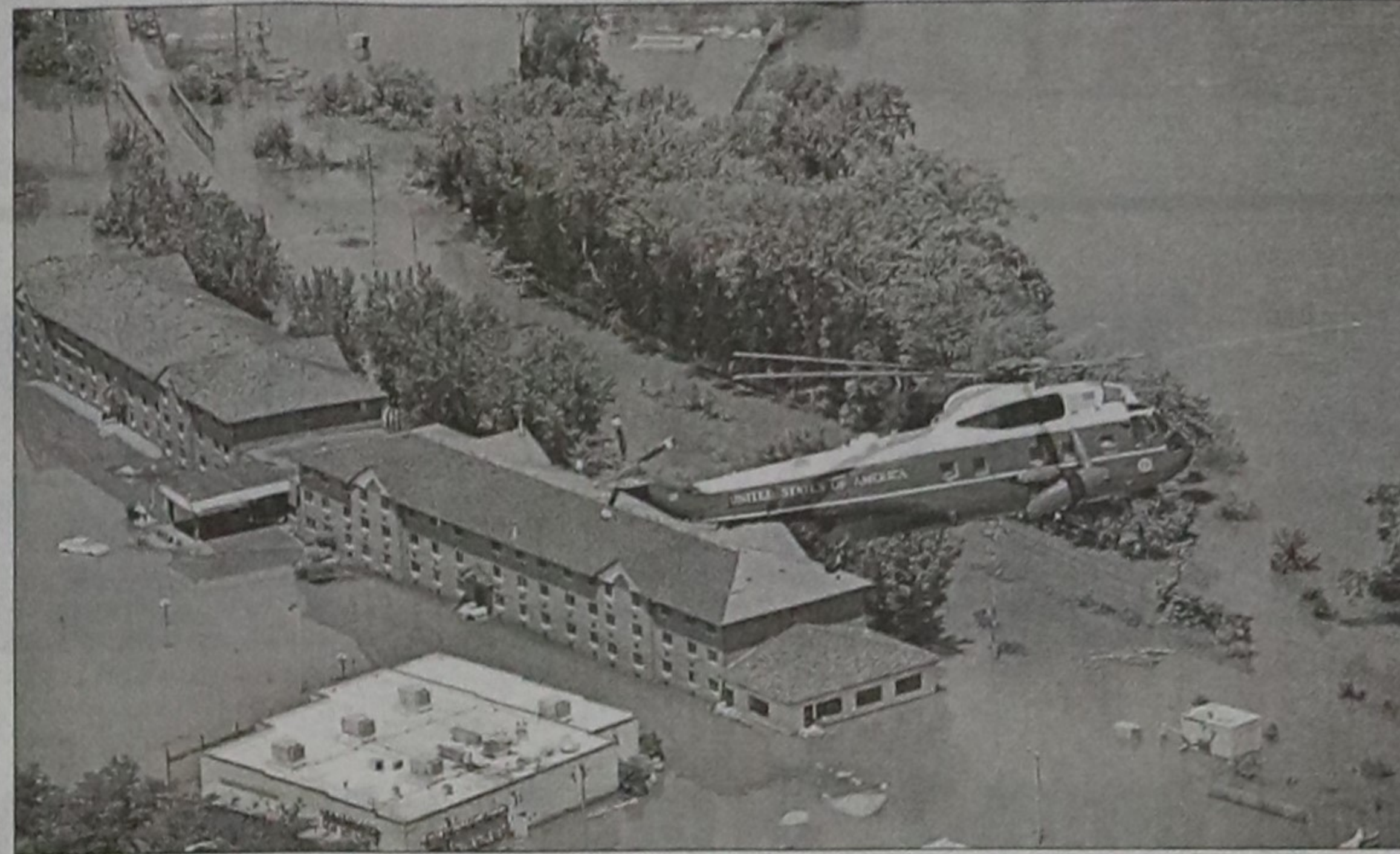
IAEA inspectors visit Syria

AFP, Vienna

The UN's atomic watchdog is sending a team of top-level experts to Damascus from Sunday to probe allegations of a clandestine nuclear facility in the remote Syrian desert.

Inspectors led by the International Atomic Energy Agency's number two, Olli Heinonen, are flying out to examine a building which the United States alleges was a covert nuclear reactor built with North Korea's help, until it was destroyed in an Israeli air attack last September.

The trip -- from June 22-24 -- was announced by IAEA chief Mohamed ElBaradei at the regular summer meeting of the watchdog's 35-member board of governors earlier this month after the US passed on intelligence suggesting the building was a covert nuclear reactor close to becoming operational.



A presidential helicopter flies above flood damage on Thursday in Iowa City, Iowa. US President George W. Bush is in Iowa to survey flood damage. More than 11 million people in nine Midwestern states have been affected by the flooding and extreme weather of recent weeks, the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) said.

Obama to try to widen the battleground

AP, Washington

Barack Obama faced two critical questions: where to play and how to pay. To answer both, the Democrat reversed course to become the first candidate to reject \$85 million in public money for the general election.

The decision will allow the record-shattering fundraiser to raise and spend as much as he wants and, thus, implement his strategy to expand the Electoral College playing field.

Shortly after announcing that he would rely on his vast network of private donors, Obama launched a bold new advertising campaign that signalled a desire to compete in a mix of traditional battleground states and Republican strongholds while trying to win over independents and disaffected Republicans after eight years of President Bush.



PHOTO: AP

This colour image released by Nasa and acquired by Nasa's Phoenix Mars Lander's Surface Stereo Imager on June 13, shows one trench informally called 'Dodo-Goldilocks' after two digs on June 12, by Phoenix's Robotic Arm. Scientists believe Nasa's Phoenix Mars Lander exposed bits of ice while recently digging a trench in the soil of the Martian arctic, the mission's principal investigator said Thursday.

Scientists believe Mars lander exposed ice crumbles

AP, Los Angeles

Scientists believe Nasa's Phoenix Mars Lander exposed bits of ice while recently digging a trench in the soil of the Martian arctic, the mission's principal investigator said Thursday.

Crumbles of bright material initially photographed in the trench later vanished, meaning they must have been frozen water that vaporized after being exposed, Peter Smith of the University of Arizona, Tucson, said in a statement.

"These little clumps completely disappearing over the course of a few days, that is perfect evidence that it's ice," Smith said. "There had been some question whether the bright material was salt. Salt can't do that."

Phoenix Mars is studying whether the arctic region of the Red Planet could be habitable. The probe is using its robotic arm to dig up soil samples, and scientists hope it will find frozen water.

However, an initial soil sample heated in a science instrument failed to yield evidence of water.

Iran warns of 'strong blow' if Israel attacks

AFP, Tehran

Tehran Friday warned its arch-enemy Israel of a "strong blow" if it takes forceful measures, after the US media reported military exercises by the Jewish state were a possible practice for a strike against Iran.

"If enemies especially Israelis and their supporters in the United States would want to use a language of force, they should rest assured that they will receive a strong blow in the mouth," senior cleric Ayatollah Ahmad Khatami said in his Friday prayers sermon.

Khatami, whose speech was

broadcast live on state radio, stressed that the Iranian nation's mentality was "to fight foreigners."

"Given this mentality, if you make a hostile look at the Islamic Iran, you will witness such a united roar by our nation that it will definitely make you regret any vicious move forever," the conservative cleric added.

A Friday report by the New York Times cited US officials as saying that a major military exercise carried out by Israel earlier this month seemed to be a practice for any potential strike against Iran's nuclear facilities.

Kidnapped Frenchman released

AFP, Kabul

A French businessman who was abducted in southern Afghanistan last month has been released safely along with two Afghan colleagues, the French Foreign Ministry announced yesterday.

An Afghan official said the 37-year-old Frenchman was freed after a ransom was handed over but there was no confirmation from French officials about any payment.

"He was freed yesterday (Thursday)," a foreign ministry official said. "He's in good health and is on his way home to France."

Gazans savour peace as truce enters 2nd day

AFP, Gaza City

Gaza residents savoured a first week-end of calm after months of bloodshed in the impoverished Palestinian enclave as a tenuous truce with Israel entered its second day yesterday.

Families and young men with towels over their shoulders headed to the beaches of Gaza City, where children flew kites in the stiff breeze and young men played volleyball under a pale blue sky.

"We all hope for a ceasefire but the people are afraid. It has never worked in the past. At any time they can strike us," Nasri al-Farajli, a Gaza dentist, said as his three young sons played in the sand a few metres (yards) from

the sea. His wife Rima, wearing a long dark robe and a white headscarf and sitting next to him under a rainbow-coloured umbrella, was even less optimistic.

"There have been many ceasefires before and the Israelis have never kept them. The situation always goes back to what it was and sometimes it gets even worse," she says.

After months of almost daily Israeli military strikes and clashes, the truce has brought welcome calm to the impoverished Gaza Strip, ruled by the Islamist Hamas movement and isolated by an Israeli blockade for over a year.

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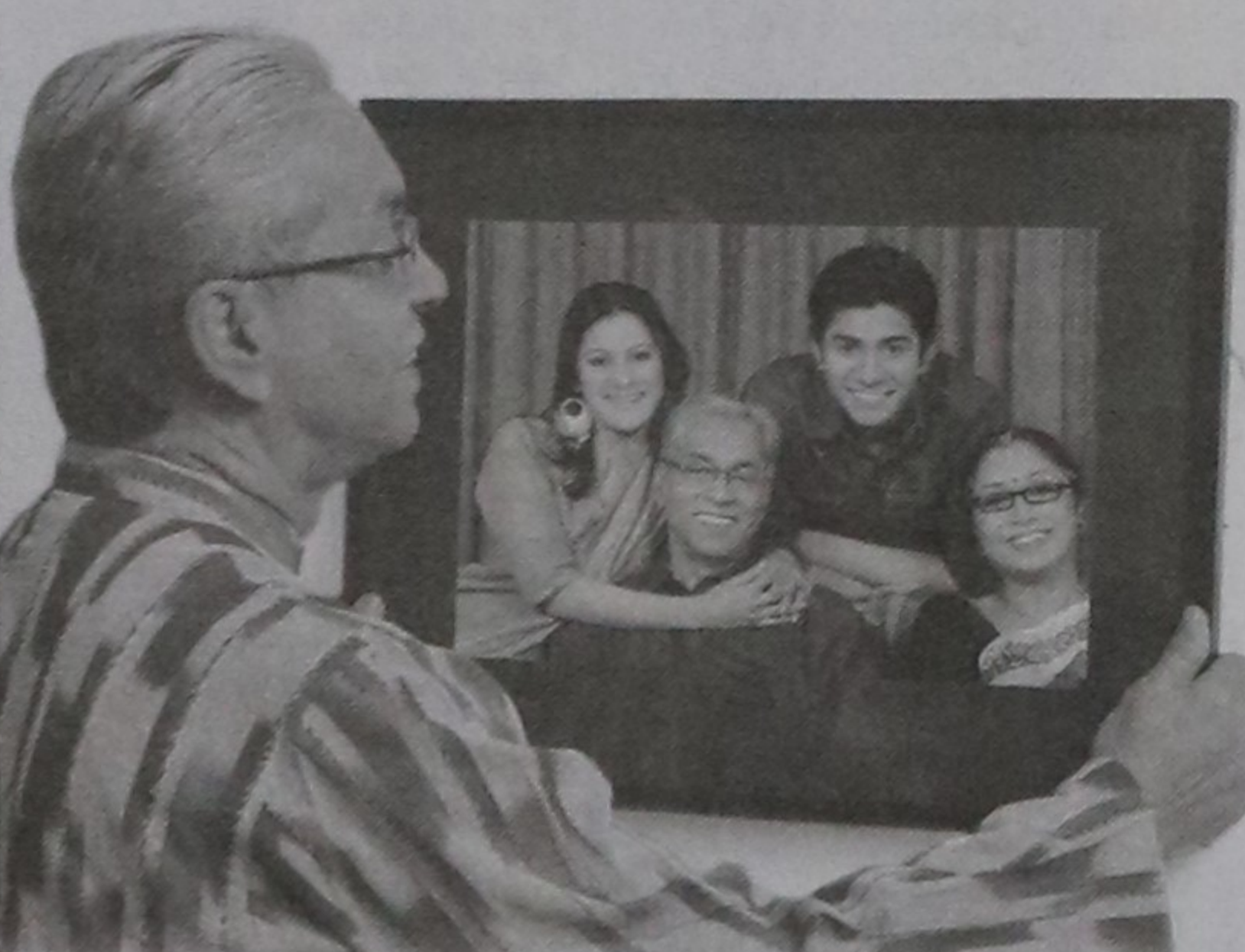
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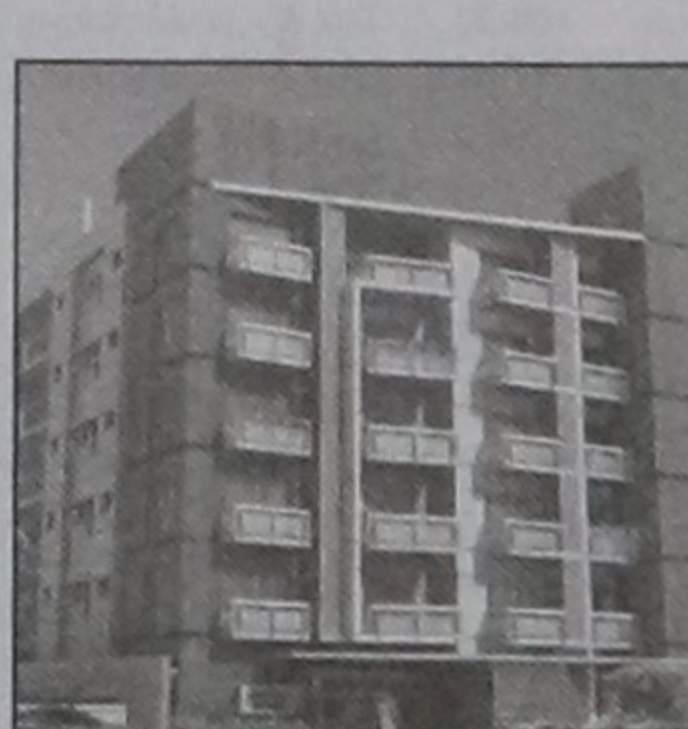
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