



BUDDHIST BACKLASH

FRAGILE TRUCE: Muslim refugees reach for aid at a camp in Rakhine State. At least 89 died in mob violence.

REUTERS/SOE ZEYA TUN

October's attacks on Rohingya Muslims were orchestrated by local Buddhist nationalists, a Reuters investigation finds

Organized attacks hit Myanmar's Muslims

BY JASON SZEP AND ANDREW R.C. MARSHALL

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BUDDHIST BACKLASH ORGANIZED ATTACKS HIT MYANMAR'S MUSLIMS



AFTERMATH: A puppy stands by its mother's corpse in East Pikesake ward in Kyaukphyu town. Nine Muslims and two Buddhists died here in a lopsided battle. Four of Kyaukphyu's five mosques were destroyed. **REUTERS/MINZAYAR**

On a hot Sunday night in a remote Myanmar village, Tun Naing punched his wife and unleashed hell.

She wanted rice for their three children. He said they couldn't afford it. Apartheid-like restrictions had prevented Muslims like Tun Naing from working for Buddhists here in Rakhine State along Myanmar's western border, costing the 38-year-old metalworker his job.

The couple screamed at each other. Tun Naing threw another punch. Neighbors joined in the row.

The commotion stirred up ethnic Ra-

111,000

Estimated number of people displaced by fighting since June in Rakhine State.

Source: Myanmar government

khine Buddhists in the next village, who began shouting anti-Muslim slurs. Relations between the two communities were already so tense that six soldiers were sta-

tioned nearby. Tun Naing's village was soon besieged by hundreds of Rakhines. And Myanmar was plunged into a week of sectarian violence that by official count claimed 89 lives, its worst in decades.

The unrest exposes the dark side of Myanmar's historic opening: an unleashing of ethnic hatred that was suppressed during 49 years of military rule.

It is a crucial test for an 18-month-old reformist government in one of Asia's most ethnically diverse countries. Jailed dissidents have been released, a free election held and censorship lifted in a democratic

transition so seamless that U.S. President Barack Obama is scheduled to make a congratulatory visit on Nov. 19.

State media have largely absolved authorities of any role in the October unrest, depicting it mostly as spontaneous eruptions of violence that often ended with Muslims burning their own homes.

But a Reuters investigation paints a more troubling picture: The wave of attacks was organized, central-government military sources told Reuters. They were led by Rakhine nationalists tied to a powerful political party in the state, incited by Buddhist monks, and, some witnesses said, abetted at times by local security forces.

A leader in the regional party, the Rakhine Nationalities Development Party, denied it had a role in organizing the assaults but conceded the possible involvement of grass-roots supporters. "When the mob rises with very hot ethnic nationalism, it is very difficult to stop them," Oo Hla Saw told Reuters in an interview.

Two townships - Pauktaw and Kyaukphyu - saw the near-total expulsion of long-established Muslim populations, in what could amount to ethnic cleansing. One village saw a massacre of dozens of Muslims, among them 21 women.

Interviews with government officials, military and police, political leaders and dozens of Buddhists and Muslims across a vast conflict zone suggest Myanmar is entering a more violent phase of persecution of its 800,000 mostly stateless Rohingya, a Muslim minority in an overwhelmingly Buddhist country.

Rohingya have lived for generations in Rakhine State, where postcard-perfect valleys sweep down to a mangrove-fringed coastline. But Rakhines and other Burmese view them as illegal immigrants from neighboring Bangladesh who deserve neither rights nor sympathy. Rakhines reject the term "Rohingya" as a modern invention, referring to them instead as "Bengali" or "kalar" - a pejorative Burmese word for



THE SPARK: Tun Naing's wife, Shakra, and children. A domestic quarrel between the Muslim couple led to the first attacks.

REUTERS/JASON SZEP

Muslims or people of South Asian descent.

October's attacks marked an acceleration of violence against the Rohingya. An earlier wave of unrest in June killed at least 80 people. Afterwards, the Rakhine State government imposed a policy of segregating Muslim communities from Buddhists across an area roughly the size of Switzerland.

More than 97 percent of the 36,394 people who have fled the latest violence are Muslims, according to official statistics. Many now live in camps, joining 75,000 mostly Rohingya displaced in June. Others have set sail for Bangladesh, Thailand and Malaysia on rickety boats, two of which have reportedly capsized, with as many as 150 people believed drowned.

There is no evidence to suggest the Buddhist-dominated national government endorsed the violence. But it appears to have anticipated trouble, stationing troops between Muslim and Buddhist villages a month ago, following rumors of attacks.

"This is racism," said Shwe Hle Maung,

43, chief of Paik Thay, where impoverished Muslim families cram into thatched homes without electricity. "The government can resolve this if it wants to in five minutes. But they are doing nothing."

The Rakhine violence is also a test for Nobel Peace Prize-winner Aung San Suu Kyi, now opposition leader in parliament, whose studied neutrality has failed to defuse tensions and risks undermining her image as a unifying moral force. Suu Kyi, a devout Buddhist, says she refuses to take sides.

At stake is the stability of one of Myanmar's most commercially strategic regions and the gold-rush of foreign investment that has come with an easing of Western economic sanctions. The United States and the European Union have suspended, not lifted, sanctions, and have made resolving ethnic conflicts a precondition for further rewards.

In Rakhine State, however, the conflict has spread, most recently to areas where Muslims have long lived peacefully with Buddhists, according to a reconstruction of the violence from Oct. 21 through Oct. 25.

In Paik Thay, the Buddhist Rakhine mobs hurled Molotov cocktails at wooden huts, while Tun Naing and his neighbors fled. Muhammad Amin, 62, said he was beaten with a metal pipe until his skull cracked. The initial violence ended after soldiers fired their guns into the air and police arrested a Rakhine.

The bloodshed was only beginning.

The next morning, Monday, October 22, hundreds of Rakhine men gathered on the southern outskirts of Mrauk-U, an ancient capital studded with Buddhist temples about 15 miles (24 km) north of Paik Thay. Then they marched to Tha Yet Oak, a Muslim fishing village of about 1,100 people, and set alight its flimsy bamboo homes.

The Muslim villagers fled by boat to nearby Pa Rein village. The Rakhine mob followed, swelling to nearly 1,000, according to Kyin Sein Aung, 66, a Rakhine farmer from a neighboring Buddhist village.

He didn't recognize the mob; he described

them as “outsiders” and said he suspected they came from Mrauk-U. Hundreds now poured across a stream separating the villages. Others came by boat. By noon, there were about 4,000 Rakhines, according to both Buddhist and Muslim villagers.

Four soldiers shot in the air to disperse the crowd but were easily overwhelmed, witnesses said. The Muslims fought back with spears and machetes, torching a rice mill and several Rakhine homes. Rakhines fired homemade guns.

Six Muslims were killed, including two women, said M.V. Kareem, 63, a Muslim elder in Pa Rein – a toll confirmed by the military. He and other villagers said they saw familiar faces and uniformed police in the angry crowd.

“I don’t know why it started,” said Kareem, who has friends in the Buddhist village. Buddhist farmer Kyin Sein Aung was baffled, too. For years, he worked in rice fields shoulder-to-shoulder with his Muslim neighbors. “We had no problems before.”

Communities like Pa Rein had avoided the June violence. But new strains emerged with the subsequent segregation of Muslim and Buddhist villages, a draconian order imposed by the Rakhine State government. Intended to prevent more violence, it backfired.

Impoverished Muslim villagers could no longer buy rice and other supplies in Buddhist towns. Transgressors were sometimes beaten with sticks or fists to warn others, according to people interviewed in six Muslim villages. Fishing nets were confiscated.

Desperation grew, with rice stocks dwindling as the monsoon peaked in October. Some Muslim villagers stole rice from Buddhist farmers, further stoking anger, said farmer Kyin Sein Aung.

By 4:30 p.m. that same Monday, several thousand Rakhines were massed outside Sam Ba Le, a village in neighboring Minbya township. By now, a pattern was emerging.

Rakhines flanked the village, hurling Molotov cocktails and firing homemade guns, said a village elder. Muslims fought

A Buddhist leader speaks

In the 1970s, Oo Hla Saw organized street protests against Myanmar strongman General Ne Win. Today, he faces a very different fight as defender of a political party that is dominated by ethnic-Rakhine Buddhists and linked to bloody assaults on Muslims.

The secretary-general of the Rakhine National Development Party (RNDP) denies his party led or organized attacks against Rohingya Muslims in a wave of sectarian violence in late October that killed at least 89 people. But grass-roots members may be involved, he conceded in an interview

“We only want peace and stability. But on the grassroots level, our supporters can be involved in this fighting. Some villagers were arrested for holding hand-made guns. They may be our party members.

Oo Hla Saw

secretary-general, Rakhine Nationalities Development Party

with Reuters. A military intelligence officer, however, told Reuters RNDP members were among the instigators.

The RNDP, set up in 2010 to run in Myanmar’s first elections in two decades, is known for tapping into a centuries-old nationalist fervor. The Rakhine are an ethnic minority within Myanmar who make up a majority in Rakhine State in the country’s West. Many RNDP members proudly recall the Rakhine Buddhist kingdom that dominated the area until a 1784 invasion by Burmans – the largest of Myanmar’s ethnic groups, who are also primarily Buddhists.

After the first Anglo-Burmese War of

1824-26, the British Raj annexed the region, known then as Arakan, and built a powerful economy with labor from neighboring Bangladesh. The RNDP says descendants of those workers invented an entirely new ethnicity, Rohingya, to stake an ancestral claim to the area and earn Myanmar citizenship. Rohingya contend their roots stretch back centuries in Rakhine State.

“They make many fabrications,” said Oo Hla Saw.

The Rakhines’ historic rivals, the Burmans, today dominate the country’s ruling Union Solidarity and Development Party (USDP), led by former generals of the military junta that oppressed Myanmar for nearly half a century. USDP Chairman Thein Sein, a Burman former general, leads Myanmar’s 18-month-old reformist government.

In Rakhine State, the RNDP remains a powerful force, a magnet for ethnic Rakhine nationalists and tough competition for the USDP in the area.

President Thein Sein has warned the RNDP it could be dissolved if found to have incited attacks on Muslims, according to the RNDP and a military source. But the party doesn’t seem worried. Early this month, Oo Hla Saw met Aung Min, a minister in the president’s office.

“He told us that the government does not intend to link the violence to any one political party,” said Oo Hla Saw. “But lower elements of our party may have been involved in this fighting, he told us.” Aung Min didn’t reply to a request for comment.

“We only want peace and stability,” Oo Hla Saw added. “But on the grassroots level, our supporters can be involved in this fighting. Some villagers were arrested for holding hand-made guns. They may be our party members.”

back, sometimes with spears or machetes, but were overpowered. Government troops shot rounds into the air. By the time the crowd left Sam Ba Le at 6 p.m., one Muslim man had been killed and two-thirds of its 331 homes razed.

As night fell, the townships of Mrauk-U and Minbya imposed 7 p.m. to 5 a.m. curfews. But worse was to come.

Tuesday began with a massacre. Reuters reporters visited dozens of villages in Rakhine State. But there was only one where their entry was barred by soldiers and police: the remote, riverside community of Yin Thei, in the shadow of the Chin mountains.

What happened there suggested a bolder and better organized mob, aided by incompetent or complicit police.

By 7 a.m. on Tuesday, hundreds of Rakhine arrived on boats to surround Yin Thei, said a resident contacted by telephone. By late afternoon, the Muslim villagers were fending off waves of attacks. The resident said children, including two of his young cousins, were killed by sword-wielding Rakhines. Most houses were burned down.

Musi Dula, a Muslim farmer from a nearby village, said he heard gunfire at about 5 p.m. A Yin Thei villager telephoned Musi Dula's neighbours and said police were shooting at them. Another farmer nervously told Reuters how he watched from afar as police opened fire from the village's western edge, also at about 5 p.m.

The official death toll is five Rakhines and 51 Muslims killed at Yin Thei, including 21 Muslim women, said a senior police officer in Naypyitaw, the new capital of Myanmar. He denied security forces opened fire or abetted the mobs. The Yin Thei resident put the toll higher, saying 62 people were buried in small graves of about 10 bodies each.

As Yin Thei burned, the last of nearly 4,000 Rohingya Muslims were fleeing the large port town of Pauktaw, in a dramatic exodus by sea that had begun five days earlier.

Tensions had simmered since Oct. 12,

“Muslims want all people to become Muslims. That's the Muslim problem.”

Kay Aye

deputy chairman, Pauktaw township

when four Rohingya fishermen were killed off Pauktaw, said a military source. Afterwards, local authorities had ordered Rohingya to stay in their own villages for their safety. Men couldn't work in town, and few dared to go fishing.

“The government gave us food but it wasn't enough,” said Num Marot, 48. “We didn't dare stay.”

Pauktaw's Rohingya began cramming into boats for the two-hour voyage to the state capital, Sittwe. Num Marot's new home would be a tarpaulin tent in a squalid camp already packed with tens of thousands of people displaced by the June violence.

About 30 minutes after the last boat pushed out to sea, the two Rohingya neighborhoods in Pauktaw were set ablaze, witnesses said. All 335 homes were destroyed. The charred and roofless frame of a

once-busy mosque is marked with graffiti: “Rakhines will drink kalar blood,” it reads, using the slur for Muslims.

Kay Aye, deputy chairman of Pauktaw township, insists Rohingya set alight their own homes and blames the communal problems on the Muslim population's doubling in 10 years. “Muslims want all people to become Muslims. That's the Muslim problem,” he said. “Most of the Muslims here are uneducated, so they tend to be ruder than Rakhines.”

Tuesday night fell. Soon a new inferno began in Kyaukphyu, a sleepy port town 65 miles (105 km) southeast of Sittwe with strategic significance: gas and oil pipelines lead from this township across Myanmar to China's energy-hungry northwest.

So far, the violence had targeted Rohingya Muslims. About a fifth of Kyaukphyu town's 24,000 people are Muslims, and many of them are Kaman. The Kaman are recognized as one of Myanmar's 135 official ethnic groups; they usually hold citizenship and can be hard to tell apart from Rakhine Buddhists.

Most Kyaukphyu Muslims lived in East



RAZED: Kyaukphyu town's East Pikesake ward. Nearly all the 891 houses destroyed in Kyaukphyu belonged to Muslims. **REUTERS/MINZAYAR**



RECUPERATING: Hla Hla Myint, seated in a hospital in Kyauktaw township, was treated for a gunshot wound to the head. **REUTERS/SOE ZEYA TUN**

Pikesake, a neighborhood wedged between Rakhine communities and the jade-green waters of the Bay of Bengal.

Relations between the two communities had begun to unravel after the June violence. The destruction of Buddhist temples by mobs in Muslim Bangladesh in early October further stoked the animosity.

The first fire began in East Pikesake on Tuesday evening, and soon dozens of houses, Rakhine and Muslim, were ablaze. The streets around the Old Village Jamae Mosque, one of East Pikesake's two mosques, became the front line in pitched battles between the two communities.

Rakhines fought with swords, iron rods and traditional Rakhine spears. The Muslims had jinglees - long darts made from sharpened bicycle spokes or fish hooks, which are fitted with plastic streamers and shot from catapults.

With the sea behind them, Pikesake's Muslims were cut off from escape by Rakhine crowds so large that the security forces, which numbered about 80 police and 100 soldiers, were overwhelmed, said Police Lieutenant Myint Khin, Kyaukphyu's station commander. "We couldn't control them," he said.

“I watched them cut up his body into four pieces.

Xanabibi

Muslim woman in Pikesake

Police fired tear gas and rubber bullets to disperse Muslim and Rakhine mobs, said Police Lieutenant Myint Khin. The military fired live rounds, said a source in the security forces, but evidently not into the crowd. Staff at Kyaukphyu hospital told Reuters they treated injuries from blades, jinglees and fire, but none from bullets.

The next morning, the rest of East Pikesake went up in flames. Myint Hlaing, a local official, said the heat was "more intense than a crematorium." It singed the fronds of five-story-high palm trees.

Rakhine men had begun pouring in from surrounding villages. Unpublished video shot by an amateur cameraman shows young men in red bandanas entering the town in convoys of tractors. They helped to terrorize Muslims living elsewhere in Kyaukphyu, according to Muslim and Rakhine witnesses. Police Lieu-

tenant Myint Khin said the security forces were too overstretched to stop them.

Men with swords pulled Susu, 39, and her husband Than Twa, 48, from a house in west Kyaukphyu. "They cut him here and here and here," said Susu, chopping at her arms and legs. She recognised many of her attackers: They were neighbours, she said. Susu ran off to find some soldiers, who escorted her back to rescue her husband. He was dead.

Only two forces could give the mob pause. The first was the national military, which scattered crowds by shooting in the air. The second was Rakhine Buddhist officials such as Myint Hlaing.

Some officials joined the mob, said local Muslims, but others confronted it. Facing cries of "Kill the kalar protector!" Myint Hlaing, 68, pleaded with angry Rakhines outside Kaman Muslim homes in his neighbourhood. "If we hadn't protected the Kamans, their houses would be destroyed and the people dead," he said.

By mid-morning, the military began evacuating Muslims by bus to a guarded refugee camp outside town.

Back in Pikesake, which was still burning, the Muslims had only one exit: the sea. A flotilla of fishing boats was preparing to leave its blazing shores.

"People swam out to the boats but were chased down and stabbed before they got there," said Abdulloh, 35, a Rohingya fisherman. Xanabibi, 46, a Kaman woman, said she watched from a boat as three Rakhine men with swords set upon a Muslim teenager. "I watched them ... cut up his body into four pieces," she said.

Rakhine Buddhists claim they witnessed atrocities, too. Myint Hlaing said he saw a Muslim on one departing boat hold aloft a severed Rakhine head.

By mid-afternoon, at least 80 boats, many overloaded with 130 or more people, had set sail for Sittwe, said witnesses. An additional 1,700 or more Muslims ended up at a squalid, military-guarded camp outside Kyaukphyu.

The official statistics tell of a lopsided battle at Kyaukphyu. Of the 11 dead, nine were Muslims. Nearly all of the 891 houses destroyed belonged to Muslims; nearly all of the 5,301 people displaced were Muslims. Four of Kyaukphyu's five mosques were destroyed.

A prominent Rakhine businessman, who requested anonymity, showed little sympathy for his former neighbours. "The majority taught them a lesson," he said.

The last spasm of violence took place at Kyauktaw, a town north of the state capital, Sittwe. At that point, the military shot into the crowd - and, for the first time, killed the Buddhists it had long been accused of siding with.

Soldiers opened fire to prevent Rakhine villagers on two boats from storming a Rohingya Muslim community, said Aung Kyaw Min, a 28-year-old Rakhine from Taung Bwe with a bullet in his leg. "I don't know why the military shot at us," he said. Two people died and 10 were wounded, villagers said.

In a separate incident the same day, security forces shot at Rakhines on Kyauktaw's outskirts, killing two and wounding four, a witness told Reuters.

The shootings seemed to send a message to the mobs. The violence stopped that day.

The senior police officer in Naypyitaw acknowledged that police were forced to fire at both Muslims and Rakhines in their attempts to subdue large crowds.

The official death toll from the October violence now stood at 89. The real toll could be higher. The extent of the killing at Yin Thei village remains unclear. Reports persist that scores of Muslims fleeing Pauktaw drowned after Rakhines rammed their boat. Nearly 4,700 homes were destroyed in 42 villages.

In a statement that Thursday, President Thein Sein warned that the "persons and organizations" behind the Rakhine State violence would be exposed and prosecuted. The mobs were well-organized and led

Path of destruction

Organized attacks against mainly Muslim Rohingya in Rakhine State led by ethnic Rakhine Buddhists from October 21 to October 25.

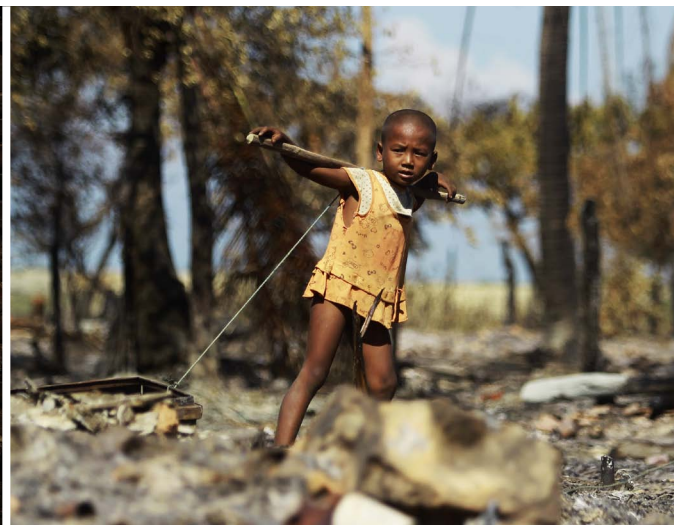


NOTE: *Exact number of deaths could not be determined. Estimates based on Reuters' sources.
Sources: Myanmar Information Management Unit, UNOCHA, Reuters research.

BUDDHIST BACKLASH ORGANIZED ATTACKS HIT MYANMAR'S MUSLIMS



BROKEN COMMUNITIES: East Pikesake ward was home to most of the Muslims living in Kyaukphyu. All have left. Top, girls pass an abandoned home; lower left, a tree stands in a ruined neighborhood. In Pauktaw township, a girl collects metal from the rubble. Nearly 95 percent of Pauktaw's Muslims have fled. **REUTERS/MINZAYAR/SOE ZEYA TUN**



by core instigators, some of whom moved village to village, military sources told Reuters.

In Kyaukphyu, however, police have so far arrested only seven people - six of them for looting. In Mrauk-U township, where most killings occurred, only 14 people have been arrested, said the military intelligence officer. The apparent impunity of the instigators is sending a chilling message to Muslim communities across Myanmar.

The intelligence officer, who has direct knowledge of the state's security operations, identified the suspected ringleaders as Rakhine extremists with ties to the Rakhine Nationalities Development Party, or RNDP, which was set up to contest Myanmar's 2010 general election. He didn't name any suspects. Buddhist monks stoked the unrest with anti-Muslim rhetoric, he added.

RNDP Secretary-General Oo Hla Saw denied that his party organized any mobs. But he acknowledged the possible involvement of supporters, low-level officials and "moderate monks who become radical when they think about Muslims."

Oo Hla Saw blamed local authorities for failing to heed rumors of impending violence, and Islamist radicals for inflaming tensions. For many Rakhines, he adds, the term Rohingya has jihadist overtones associated with the "Mujahid," autonomy-seeking rebels in northern Rakhine State from 1949 to 1961, who called themselves ethnic Rohingya. (Independent historians say the rebels did popularize the term "Rohingya," but cite a few references to it since the 18th century.)

Even today, Oo Hla Saw said, the Rohingya want "to set up an autonomous Islamic community. They are systematically scheming to do that."

Most Rohingya struggle simply to get by. A 2010 survey by the French group Action Against Hunger found a malnutrition rate of 20 percent, far above the emergency threshold set by the World Health Organization.



DISPLACED: A Muslim woman who fled the violence in Kyaukphyu at a refugee camp.

Curfews remain in place across Rakhine State.

REUTERS/SOE ZEYA TUN

Many arrived as laborers from Bangladesh under British rule in the 19th century - grounds the government now uses to deny them citizenship. Rohingya were effectively rendered stateless under the 1982 Citizenship Law, which excluded them from the list of indigenous ethnic groups. Officials refer to them as Bengalis. Most Rohingya found it hard to apply for naturalized citizenship, since they couldn't speak Burmese or prove long-term residence.

Monks, symbols of democracy during 2007 protests against military rule, have helped fuel the outrage against Muslims. A week before the violence erupted, monks led nationwide protests against plans by the Organisation of Islamic Cooperation (OIC), the world's biggest Islamic body, to set up a liaison office in Rakhine State.

An anti-OIC rally in Sittwe on Oct. 15 "angered Muslims here," conceded Nyar Nar, 32, one of the Rakhine monks who led it. He regards Muslims as foreign invaders. "As monks, we have morality and ethics," he said. "But if outsiders come to occupy our land, then we will take up swords to protect it."

In some parts of the state, the mood is celebratory. "This is the best time because there are no Muslims here," said Zaw Min Oo, a Rakhine shoe seller in Pauktaw township. Nearly 95 percent of a 20,000-strong Muslim community there is now gone.

The peace might be short-lived. The state's clumsy attempts at segregation helped create the conditions for the October violence. Further segregation - including the confining of tens of thousands of Muslims in seething camps - could spark more violence. Curfews remain in force across much of Rakhine State.

In Kyaukphyu town, starving dogs sniff through the ashes while municipal workers heave scrap metal into a truck. The only Muslim left in town is Ngwe Shin, an old woman suffering from mental illness. She can often be found near the market, shuffling past vandalized or shuttered homes.

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