Covenant on Economic, Social, and Cultural Rights Alternative Report Submission: Violations of Indigenous Peoples' Rights in Guatemala

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Joint submission by:

Cultural Survival

Cultural Survival is an international Indigenous rights organization with global Indigenous leadership and consultative status with ECOSOC. Cultural Survival is located in Cambridge, Massachusetts, and is registered as a 501(c)(3) non-profit organization in the United States.

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Asociación Sobrevivencia Cultural

Asociación Sobrevivencia Cultural is a non-profit civil society organization that works for the identity and rights of Indigenous Peoples in Guatemala, especially related to Indigenous Peoples' free expression of thought via their own media, such as community radio and others. It was legally established in 2010 and is a member of the Community Radio Movement of Guatemala, which promotes the approval of Bill 4087: Community Media Law, so that Indigenous Peoples can access radio frequencies in their exercise of freedom of expression.

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I. Executive Summary

Although the State of Guatemala has ratified many international treaties and agreements, Indigenous Peoples in Guatemala are still vulnerable to violations of their fundamental rights such as freedom of expression, evidenced by the fact that the State has yet to pass a bill to legally recognize community radios and instead penalizes radio stations' activities. The UPR has recommended the implementation of Decision 4238-2011 for Indigenous Peoples to have access to radio frequencies; this recommendation is reaffirmed in the decision by the Inter-American Court of Human Rights, issued on October 6, 2021, which states that the State of Guatemala is guilty of violating the rights of freedom of thought and expression, to cultural life, and to equality under the law. The decision also recognizes the right that Indigenous Peoples have to establish and use their own media and the fundamental relationship between this right and other rights.

Indigenous rights and environmental defenders in Guatemala and Indigenous spiritual and ancestral authorities are also suffering a wave of violence that remains unpunished, violating their rights to freedom of expression and religion and to self-determination and Free, Prior and Informed Consent.

Cultural Survival and Asociación Sobrevivencia Cultural submit this report to inform the Committee of actions that the State of Guatemala has taken in the last few years.

II. Background Information

Guatemala is a multiethnic, multicultural, and multilingual country. According to the 2018 Guatemalan government population census, 43.8% of the population is Indigenous—41.7% Maya, 0.1% Garifuna, and 1.8% Xinka. The Law of National Languages recognizes 25 languages in the country. According to data from the 2018 official census of the State of Guatemala, more than 6 million people speak Indigenous languages, comprising 41.7% of the total population; however, the assimilation policies implemented by the State promote the Spanish language at the expense of Indigenous Languages. It is urgent that public services and information be offered in Indigenous languages. International conventions, treaties, and declarations ratified by the State guarantee Indigenous Peoples' freedom of thought and expression and the right to access their own means of communication.

Access to the media plays a decisive role in the promotion of Indigenous rights.⁷ Instead of implementing changes and complying with CESCR, CERD, UPR, and other mechanisms' recommendations, the State has perpetuated its discriminatory policy, denying Indigenous Peoples access to radio frequencies and criminalizing community radio operators.

The State of Guatemala also continues to grant licenses for development projects, particularly mines and hydroelectric projects, which violate Indigenous Peoples' rights to Free, Prior and Informed Consent, leading to the criminalization or murder of land and rights defenders.

III. Ongoing Indigenous Rights Violations

1. Violations of the Right to Freedom of Expression

(CESCR Articles 1, 2, 5, 15)

The Guatemalan State continues to violate Indigenous Peoples' right to freedom of expression. It is specifically violating the CESCR Articles 1, 2, 5, and 15, as well as the Guatemalan Peace Accords Section H on the Agreement on Identity and Rights of Indigenous Peoples, ^{9,} CERD Articles 2 and 5, and ILO Convention 169 Article 30. The Inter-American Court of Human Rights has determined that the State of Guatemala has also violated articles 1, 2, 13, 24 and 26 of the American Convention on Human Rights.

a. Guatemala's internal laws excludes Indigenous Peoples from accessing the radio spectrum and criminalizes the operation of their community radios

Community radio has a long and important history among the Indigenous communities of Guatemala. These community radios have an important role not just in keeping the Indigenous communities they serve informed, but also by promoting and protecting their languages, rights, and cultures. These radios are non-profit and are administered and operated by the Indigenous communities themselves. However, it is impossible for them to legally access radio frequencies under the current legal framework whose only criteria for awarding licenses is whomever bids the highest. In addition to excluding Indigenous community radios from the legal framework, the State criminalizes the operation of these radios, raiding them, seizing their equipment, and prosecuting the staff and volunteers that operate them. This is all in spite of the commitment that Guatemala made in its Peace Accords, signed in 1996, wherein the State agreed to "facilitate access to frequencies for Indigenous projects" and "[p]romote the repeal of any regulation of the legal system that hinders the right of Indigenous Peoples to have access to media for the development of their identity." ¹⁰

For example, the Indigenous community radio Juventud suffered one of these raids in December 2014, and its transmission equipment was seized. That same month, the Juzgado de Primera Instancia Penal, Narcoactividad y Delitos Contra el Ambiente (the local criminal court for Narco-activity and Crimes Against the Environment) of the department of Sololá (record C-07002-2014-00925) ordered the Fiscalía del Ministerio Público de Delitos Cometidos por el Uso Ilegal del Espectro Radioeléctrico (Attorney General's office, Prosecuting Attorney for Crimes Committed by Illegal Use of the Radio Spectrum) to immediately deliver everything that was seized to the community mayor for its return to the radio. With this order, the judge of the Sololá court invoked the rights of Indigenous Peoples within the national and international legal framework, but these were not considered in later stages of the process before higher courts. In November 2021, and after various appeals of the 2014 decision, the local criminal court for Narco-activity and Crimes Against the Environment of the department of Chimaltenango¹¹ presented, during a hearing, the resolution of the Constitutional Court (record No. 3806-2021 of the resolution of the Constitutional Court) which determined that the ancestral authority of Sololá must return the transmission equipment that was seized in December 2014 from Radio Juventud back to the Ministerio Público (Attorney General's office).

In November 2018, the Ministerio Público raided four Indigenous community radio stations and imprisoned two radio personnel for theft. ¹² During the hearings it was demonstrated that the evidence presented by the Ministerio Público lacked basis, for which the personnel were released and the case closed in February 2019. ¹³ On September 16, 2020, Radio La Voz de Zaragoza in Zaragoza, Chimaltenango department, was

raided and one radio communicator was captured, subjected to a legal process, and released on bail. ¹⁴ The OHCHR in Guatemala has documented raids of other Indigenous community radios, confiscation of their equipment, and criminalization of communicators on charges of "theft." ¹⁵ The continued absence of a legal framework makes Indigenous community radios and their personnel vulnerable. Asociación Sobrevivencia Cultural has also gathered information on the existence of about 21 Indigenous community radios, raided since 2006, who lost their transmission equipment after its seizure by the government, who never returned it to the communities.

On October 24, 2021, there was an attempted raid on Community Radio Xyaab' Tzultaq'a¹⁶ during a State of Siege. According to information provided,¹⁷ elements of the National Civil Police and the Army arrived at the offices of the organization Defensoría Maya Q'eqchi' of El Estor, Izabal department, asking for the radio's location. The radio personnel of Radio Xyaab' Tzultaq'a expressed their indignation, as this was not the first time this had happened. They added that they run the risk of being arrested for using the radio to provide information on what is happening in the region, such as rights violations and extractive projects. Various organizations had condemned a prior raid on this same radio¹⁸ by the Ministerio Público on September 27, 2019, which took advantage of another State of Siege decreed to confront organized crime. The IACHR Special Rapporteur for Freedom of Expression condemned this raid as a threat to freedom of expression.¹⁹

Considering this context, the Inter-American Court of Human Rights issued their decision on October 6, 2021, declaring the Republic of Guatemala "internationally responsible for the violation of the rights to freedom of expression, equality before the law and participation in cultural life, in relation to the obligations of respect and guarantee of non-discrimination and the obligation to adopt internal legal regulations." Consequently, the Inter-American Court mandates that Guatemala adapt the country's internal legal framework, in consultation with Indigenous Peoples, recognizing the function of Indigenous community radios, reserving part of the radio spectrum for them, and establishing a simple and free procedure for obtaining radio frequency licenses. The Inter-American Court also ordered the State to abstain from criminalizing the operators of Indigenous community radios and to eliminate existing sentences. The Guatemalan State also must stop raiding these radios and seizing their transmission equipment. Finally, the Inter-American Court ordered Guatemala to publish and disseminate information on the court decision and a summary of the same.

Nine months have passed since the Inter-American Court publicized its decision, yet the State of Guatemala has not even published the decision, nor has it made any effort to communicate with the Indigenous community victims of the case nor their representatives. It has been the NGOs Cultural Survival, Asociación Sobrevivencia Cultural, Suffolk Law School Indigenous Peoples Clinic, and the Community Radio Movement who have been publicizing the decision among congress people and requesting information from the Presidential Commission for Peace and Human Rights (COPADEH), the state body "responsible for coordinating actions oriented towards compliance and attention to national and international commitments on the subject of Human Rights."²¹

a. Bills that seek to further establish criminalization of Indigenous community radios, defining the crime of theft of the radioelectric spectrum

The Inter-American Court of Human Rights has established that "criminal persecution" of Indigenous community radios and their personnel is "disproportionate, in how much it excessively affect[s] freedom of expression and the right to participate in the cultural life of [Indigenous] peoples". ²² Contravening this decision, the State of Guatemala has bills pending in Congress that seek to recognize the radioelectric spectrum as a "bien mueble" (movable property); sanction those who access frequencies illegally with the crime of theft; and impose prison sentences. ²³

b. Bills on community radio lack the consent of Indigenous Peoples

On May 15, 2019, congress people presented a bill to reform the General Telecommunications Law Decree 94-96, Registry No. 5531.²⁴ The bill was developed without consultation nor consent from Indigenous Peoples. An analysis of the bill finds that it does not recognize any classification of community radios as is mandated by Inter-American standards²⁵ and according to Article 52: Transitorio, Section H of the proposal, the Superintendencia will assign frequencies awarded to community radios to the Dirección de Radiodifusión Nacional (National Broadcasting Directorate), evading the responsibility of the Superintendencia de Telecomunicaciones (Superintendency of Telecommunications) and justifying the postponement so as not to comply with the exhortations from the Constitutional Court, the Peace Accords, and international instruments of human rights and freedom of expression.

On February 25, 2022, Bill 5965 was presented before the plenary session. The bill is called Ley Reguladora de las Radios Comunitarias (Law to Regulate Community Radios) and it seeks to reform the General Telecommunications Law Decree 94-96. The Indigenous community radios of Guatemala and their accompanying organizations rejected this proposed law via a press release they find it fails to comply with what the Inter-American Court orders. 1) The State has not undertaken any prior consultation with the victim communities nor more broadly with Indigenous communities nationwide; 2) the bill does not clearly define Indigenous community radio; 3) the procedure for obtaining licenses is a, andous; and 4) the bill does not reserve a portion of the radio spectrum for Indigenous community radio stations. The group demands that the State of Guatemala comply with guarantee measures and reparations as established by the Inter-American Court decision and that representatives in Congress act in alignment with the law and do not take undue advantage of the struggles and successes of Indigenous communities and Indigenous community radios to benefit other interested groups, nor act without meaningful, effective prior consultation with the Indigenous Peoples of the country.

6. Violations of the Right to Freedom of Religion

(CESCR Articles 1, 2, 5, 15)

The State of Guatemala continues to fail to comply with its own Political Constitution, which, in its Article 36, recognizes freedom of religion for all people (in practice or belief, in public or private). Furthermore, Guatemala has ratified various international treaties which promise to protect human rights and the freedom of religion, including CESCR Articles 1, 2, 5, and 15; CERD Article 5; and ICCPR Articles 2, 18, and 26. Guatemala has also signed the UNDRIP and is in violation of Article 12. Finally, the Guatemalan Peace Accords recognize, for the first time since colonization, the right of Indigenous Peoples to practice their own religions/spiritualities/cosmovisions. Despite its commitment to the protection of religious freedom, the State has not developed relevant policies or legislation, and continues to promulgate the idea that there

are no violations of this freedom, relying on a lack of records of tensions between members of different religious communities or of conflicts that the State has had to mediate.

Despite these treaties and agreements, violations to the freedom of religion against Indigenous Peoples and individuals in Indigenous communities continue to rise. In the last 16 years, 21 spiritual leaders have been tortured and murdered in Guatemala.³⁰ On May 17, 2022, spiritual guide of the Maya Q'eqchi' Peoples, Adela Choc, and her daughter were kidnapped and threatened by members of the Chichipate community accusing her of being a "witch."³¹ The Human Rights Ombudsman's Office and a justice of the peace intervened, and she was released after being abused by members of the evangelical community. She remains exiled from the community, which reflects the profound discrimination and criminalization that spiritual women and territorial defenders suffer.³² Even though the State of Guatemala secured her release, it has also failed in its obligation to prevent religious discrimination and to protect potential victims; also, the State is still not diligent in investigating and prosecuting those responsible for these actions. The State has fallen short of its obligation to protect all its citizens, prohibit discrimination, and punish those responsible for acts of violence, leaving them with impunity.

Similarly, the spiritual leader Domingo Choc Che was accused of "witchcraft" and was blamed for the death of a community member; he was murdered on June 5, 2020. Despite the intervention of community authorities, members of the evangelical church captured him, tied him to a vehicle, and murdered him. They kept the authorities away by threatening them, and when Domingo asked them for water the aggressors responded by pouring gasoline on him and burning him. ³³ This murder and the kidnapping of Adela Choc are related to the structures of "social cleansing" for economic control, as ways to intimidate the work of Indigenous authorities, and they expose the racism and discrimination that continue to promote violence and violations of human rights and of the freedom of religion. ³⁴

The affected communities recommend that the State become more involved in preventing crimes against ancestral and religious leaders of Indigenous communities.³⁵ They have also demanded that the State decrease the number of tortures and murders of religious leaders and better regulate how churches and their branches work in order to stop the re-evangelization these churches do within Indigenous communities, which can be considered as religious fundamentalism. They also request that the State stop criminalizing spiritual guides in order to promote a peaceful coexistence and to admit ancestral practices and public cultures, locally and nationally, as it is stated in the Political Constitution of the Republic of Guatemala (Article 66).³⁶

On May 26, 2022, President Alejandro Giammatei recognized and accredited 50 spiritual leaders for the practice of their spirituality in archeological sites that are sacred places for Maya Peoples.³⁷ However, many of the sacred sites in the ancient cities are threatened with privatization in Bill 5923 known as "Rescue of Pre-Hispanic Heritage" (currently awaiting congressional approval); this bill aims to privatize sacred sites. If the initiative is approved, it would result in the dispossession and economic exploitation of 2,724 sacred sites and ceremonial centers.³⁸ As practitioners of their spirituality at these sites, Maya Peoples have the right to freedom of religion (CERD Article 5), and to practice their cultures and traditions, access ceremonial sites, and manage archaeological sites and ceremonial centers (UNDRIP Articles 11, 12). They also have a right to Free, Prior and Informed Consent on decisions that affect them (UNDRIP Articles 19, 28, 32). The privatization of ancient cities is a violation of the ancestral right to Maya collective territory and Indigenous spirituality (UNDRIP Articles 8, 25, 26, 27, 32).

7. Violations of the rights of Indigenous defenders of land and rights (CESCR Articles 1, 2, 5)

According to the UN Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR), "in Guatemala, there is a growing environment of stigmatization of human rights defenders, including in social networks, which undermines the legitimacy of their work and could lead to attacks against them."³⁹

Defenders denounce mineral and resource extraction in Indigenous territories as violations of Indigenous Peoples' rights, and they suffer at the hands of extractive companies and other third parties who profit from mining and economic development and disregard the affected Indigenous communities. ⁴⁰ These attacks violate CESCR Articles 1, 2, and 5. CERD Articles 2 and 5, as well as the right to life in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (Article 3) and the right to practice to defend human rights in the Declaration on the Right and Responsibility of Individuals, Groups and Organs of Society to Promote and Protect Universally Recognized Human Rights and Fundamental Freedoms. ⁴¹ The State also violates the right to life and to the conservation and protection of the environment, and the right to determine the development of lands, territory and resources, as articulated in the UNDRIP (Articles 7, 26, 29). It also violates the right to freedom from harassment, torture, and unlawful imprisonment, articulated in the ICCPR (Articles 6(1) and 9(1). ⁴²

In 2014, the Inter-American Court ordered the State of Guatemala to create a public policy to protect the rights of defenders, ⁴³ which has not been implemented yet. ⁴⁴

Based on non-exhaustive data collected by Cultural Survival, since March 2017, there have been at least 38 attacks against Indigenous rights and environmental defenders in Guatemala. The human rights organization Unidad de Protección a Defensoras y Defensores de Derechos Humanos (UDEFEGUA) (Human Rights Defenders Protection Unit) notes that attacks tend to fall in three categories: murders, criminalization, and attacks. Much of the violence can be connected to Indigenous defenders' advocacy in the face of violations of Indigenous communities' right to FPIC under UNDRIP and ILO Convention 169. 46

The State of Guatemala has rarely supported the rights of defenders and Indigenous Peoples; usually these groups do not receive any kind of support or relief from government authorities, even in situations where it's not the State directly committing the violence. This, itself, represents another form of criminalization towards defenders and contributes to the impunity of aggressors and violates Guatemala's obligations under CESCR.⁴⁷

The public nature of the attacks points to the lack of social control and a breakdown of the central authority in a State that has committed to and ratified international treaties for the protection of the rights of human rights defenders and Indigenous Peoples. 48

Additionally, the detention and kidnapping of Indigenous ancestral authorities has created a climate of fear and uncertainty around the public practice of Indigenous spirituality and culture. In 2020, there was a trend of cases where defenders were accused of having committed crimes against companies or state officials, and consequently they were killed. Defenders' main areas of focus continue to be access to land, defense of territory, and the pursuit of "buen vivir" for communities through the popular assembly process. ⁴⁹

Cases from the past few years demonstrate the scale of violence against Indigenous defenders in Guatemala and the clear need for the State to act to protect defenders and implement their rights to live without racial and ethnic discrimination, to freedom of expression, to self-determination, and to their lands and territories.

IV. Concluding Observations from the last CESCR Review of Guatemala

In the CESCR's last review of Guatemala, the Committee made the following recommendations relevant to the issues raised in this report:

- "6. The Committee recommends that the State party grant recognition to Indigenous Peoples in its Constitution. It also recommends that the State party incorporate mechanisms for recognizing the rights of Indigenous Peoples over their traditional lands and their natural resources. The Committee urges the State party to conduct an up-to-date census of the Indigenous population and to continue strengthening measures to ensure their effective enjoyment of their economic, social and cultural rights."
- "7. The Committee urges the State party, in connection with the exploration and exploitation of mining resources and hydrocarbons, to adopt expeditious measures to carry out consultations to allow free expression of consent to the desirability of such projects, sufficient time and opportunity to reflect and take a decision, together with measures to preserve cultural integrity and provide reparation, where necessary. In this respect, the Committee recommends that the State party urgently establish a legal mechanism for conducting such consultations, in accordance with the International Labour Organization (ILO) Indigenous and Tribal Peoples Convention, 1989 (No. 169) and with the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples. It also recommends that the State party revise the legislative and institutional provisions relating to projects for the exploitation of natural resources, in consultation with the Indigenous Peoples, and that it strengthen its capacity to oversee extractive industries and ensure that they do not have a negative impact on the rights of Indigenous Peoples, their territory and their natural resources."

"26. ... The Committee urges the State party to take urgent steps to preserve and promote the use of [I]ndigenous languages."

V. State Report:

The State of Guatemala's report details various measures that the State is taking, including bills on consultation with Indigenous Peoples regarding land use; intercultural bilingual education; and the right to participation in cultural life. However, Indigenous leaders in Guatemala affirm that neither consultation nor the right to Free, Prior, Informed Consent have been adequately implemented; that these rights continue to be egregiously violated; and that, moreover, Indigenous people and communities who affirm their rights in the face of violations continue to be the target of violent and illegal attacks, accusations, arrests, and incarceration. They also affirm that efforts to support Indigenous languages through education do not extend to Indigenous Peoples' own content production through Indigenous media outlets; and that

the right to participation in cultural life does not extend to production of cultural content through Indigenous-run media.

VI. Recommendations

Cultural Survival and Sobrevivencia Cultural urge the government of Guatemala to:

- 1. Recognize the constant violation of Indigenous Peoples' freedom of expression caused by the denial of their access to their own media and radio frequencies.
- 2. Comply with the decision of the Inter-American Court of Human Rights and bring domestic law into alignment with it, in consultation with Indigenous Peoples, by recognizing the function of Indigenous community radios, reserving a portion of the radio spectrum for them, and establishing a simple and free procedure for obtaining licenses to access frequencies.
- 3. Comply with the decision of the Inter-American Court of Human Rights by ceasing the criminalization of Indigenous community radios and eliminating existing sentences facing Indigenous radio personnel.
- 4. In accordance with the Inter-American Court of Human Rights' order, publish an official summary of the court's decision in the official newspaper and in another newspaper with broad national circulation, translated into Maya languages, and publish the full decision on an official State website and on the website of the Superintendencia de Telecomunicaciones.
- 5. Order the Superintendencia de Telecomunicaciones to conduct an audit of the radio spectrum which includes precise data on owners, coverage, and usufruct.
- 6. Stop promoting initiatives that attempt to violate Freedom of Expression.
- 7. Seek Free, Prior, and Informed Consent from Indigenous Peoples prior to promoting bills that affect Indigenous Peoples.
- 8. Guarantee Indigenous Peoples' full participation in the process of adopting decisions that concern them and ensure that they are consulted in the planning and execution of both bills and large-scale development projects.
- 9. Reject bills that violate the Peace Accords and the Inter-American Court decision, such as Bills 5531 and 5494, as well as any other bill that would limit or violate Indigenous Peoples' freedom of expression.
- 10. Reject Bill 5923 "Rescue of Prehispanic Patrimony" because it threatens Indigenous Peoples' collective ancestral property, especially that of Maya Peoples, threatening Indigenous spirituality.
- 11. Implement all development plans in accordance with international human rights norms, including the UN Guiding Principles on Business and Human Rights; Free, Prior, and Informed Consent; and effective resources and justice for communities affected by development and corporate operations.
- 12. Create a national action plan on implementation and protection of the rights of Indigenous Peoples based on the document "Building an Inclusive, Sustainable and Resilient Future with Indigenous Peoples: A Call To Action" published by the UN system (Chief Executives Board for coordination (CEB). ⁵⁰
- 13. Compensate Indigenous Peoples for the losses and arbitrary imprisonment for filing suit against the violation of collective Indigenous rights upon the State's authorization of supposed

- development projects without considering the Free, Prior, and Informed Consent of the affected Indigenous Peoples.
- 14. Adopt public policies to protect the rights and freedom of Indigenous rights and environmental defenders and put an end to the criminalization and attacks on defenders.
- 15. Develop a plan to ensure the implementation of the right to freedom of religion, protected in the Political Constitution of the Republic of Guatemala and in the international agreements that Guatemala has ratified to protect the free practice of religion by Indigenous Peoples in general and the protection of ancestral and spiritual leaders in particular from attacks that threaten their lives.
- 16. Begin the process of transferring management and ownership of sacred sites and cities to ancestral authorities and collectives of Maya spiritual guides.

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⁵ Us, Hugo, Carlos Mendoza, and Vivian Guzmán. 2021. Pueblos indígenas en Guatemala: desafios demográficos, lingüísticos y socioeconómicos: análisis comparativo de los censos 2002 vs 2018.

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⁹ Acuerdo sobre Identidad y Derechos de los Pueblos Indígenas, GT, 31 Mar., 1995, UN Doc. A/49/882S/1995/256, 10 abril, 1995; sec. III. (H)(2)(b) ("AIDPI"), disponible en https://undocs.org/es/A/49/882.

¹⁰ Acuerdo sobre Identidad y Derechos de los Pueblos Indígenas, GT, 31 Mar., 1995, UN Doc. A/49/882S/1995/256, 10 abril, 1995; sec. III. (H)(2)(b) ("AIDPI"), disponible en https://undocs.org/es/A/49/882.

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