

Group 62 – Information Centre for Asylum and Migration

Briefing Notes

11 May 2020

Afghanistan

Hostilities, attacks, civilian casualties

The media reported fighting and attacks in numerous provinces once again last week. On 07.05.20 the police chief in the eastern province of Khost was killed together with two of his bodyguards in an attack by the Taliban. At least 20 people were killed and at least six injured, including two police officers, at a demonstration against the government's protections measures to combat COVID-19 and the sluggish distribution of relief supplies in Ghor province, Central Afghanistan.

An analysis of confirmed reports of security incidents by the New York Times has revealed that at least 350 government forces and 66 civilians were killed in April 2020. The death toll so far in May 2020 stands at 42 members of the security forces and four civilians (as per 07.05.20). According to the Afghanistan Independent Human Rights Commission (AIHRC), 43 civilians were killed and 73 injured in the first ten days of Ramadan (24.04. to 05.05.20). AIHRC identifies the provinces in which civilian casualties have been reported as Kabul, Ghazni, Logar, Kandahar, Paktia and Helmand.

Collaboration between ISKP and Haggani network

According to intelligence information released by the Afghan secret service, IS Khorasan Province (ISKP) and the Haqqani network are collaborating. The secret service claims that the rocket attack on the presidential swearing-in ceremony, the attacks on a Sikh temple and the memorial ceremony at Mazari's grave as well as the rocket attack on Bagram airport were jointly carried out by ISKP and the Haqqani network.

Exchange of prisoners

The government has now released more than 900 Taliban, representing more than half of the agreed total of 1,500 prisoners. The government has indicated that further prisoners can be released when peace talks with the Taliban begin.

COVID-19 pandemic

The number of confirmed cases of COVID-19 continues to rise. People have tested positive in all 34 provinces. Kabul has the highest number of cases, followed by Herat, Kandahar and Balkh.

The nationwide lockdown is to remain in force to varying degrees until 24.05.20. The provinces of Kandahar, Helmand and Ghazni have since approved a number of measures to ease the lockdown. Restrictions on movement have been lifted and shops are allowed to open at certain times of the day. Balkh's provincial government has also announced relaxations, while in Herat the virus is spreading rapidly due to inadequately implemented precautionary measures. These measures apply in particular to people employed in public services.

5,801 people returned from Iran between 26.04. and 02.05.20 - 42 % less than in the previous week. 3,526 of these were voluntary returnees, while 2,275 had been expelled. The majority of the voluntary returnees, many of whom initially head for Herat, stated that they had lost their jobs in Iran, while 29 % said that they were returning for fear of becoming infected with coronavirus. The border crossing points to Pakistan (Torkham and Spin Boldak) remain open essentially for the transport of goods and relief supplies (Monday to Friday). A limited number of people are able to cross the border on foot on Saturdays.

Algeria

Military manoeuvre close to Sahrawi refugee camp

The Algerian military reportedly carried out a manoeuvre near to the Sahrawi refugee camp in Tindouf on 05.05.20. Tindouf lies in the Algerian part of Western Sahara. Some 200,000 people who have fled from the part of Western Sahara to which Morocco lays claim as southern provinces have been living in these refugee camps for 45 years. Tensions between Algeria and Morocco have heightened in recent months on account of the situation in Western Sahara.

Cameroon

Mamfe: Mayor killed by separatists

According to the state broadcasting company, CRTV, armed anglophone separatists shot dead Ashu Prisley Ojong, the major of the city of Mamfe (population approx. 40,000, capital of the Manyu district) in an attack on his car convoy in the South West region on 10.05.20. Citing a high-ranking member of the military from the region, Reuters has reported that two soldiers were also killed in the attack. The attack took place around eight kilometres outside of Mamfe, near Ojong's village of birth, Eshobi. Ojong was elected major of Mamfe on 25.02.20 as a representative of the governing party Rassemblement démocratique du Peuple Camerounais (RDPC). He is one of the first high-ranking elected representatives of the state to have been killed against the backdrop of the continuing conflict between the army and the armed separatist militias in the two English-speaking regions North-West and South-West.

China

COVID-19 pandemic

The government has acknowledged shortcomings in the health service, announcing that the health authority will consequently be setting up a centralised, uniform and effective system which will enable faster responses to crises. On 11.05.20 the authorities reported new infections in Wuhan for the second day in a row. Five new infections were confirmed in a residential district. These are the first known cases in Wuhan for more than a month. Eleven new asymptomatic cases were additionally reported in the surrounding province. There is a new focus of infection in Shulan (north-eastern province of Jilin). The city has been placed under quarantine.

Colombia

Majoré: Indigenous families driven from their homes

At the end of April 2020 armed illegal groups forced around 70 families belonging to the Embera Eyábida indigenous community to abandon settlements in the autonomous region of Majoré in the south-west of the departamento Antioquía. Corresponding media reports refer to an announcement by the association of indigenous peoples of Antioquia (OAI), stating that the families have found temporary accommodation at a school and pointing out that a further 1,000 families in the region face being driven from their homes. Both paramilitary groups and the guerrilla organisation Ejército de Liberación Nacional (ELN) operate in the region. Citing the United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA), there were reports in the media at the end of April 2020 that more than 10,000 people have already been driven from their homes by armed groups in Colombia since the beginning of the year.

Spying scandal

It emerges from reports in the media that the military spied on at least 130 people in 2019 in order to obtain personal information on Columbian and foreign journalists, politicians, lawyers and non-governmental organisations. Funds deriving from other countries' cooperation with the Columbian armed forces were allegedly misappropriated for this purpose. The journalist Nick Casey apparently came in for particularly close monitoring. Casey reported on an alleged military order to up the stated numbers of criminals and rebels killed. This reminds many people of the so-called 'falsos positivos' scandal. In the first decade of the 21st century, Colombian soldiers killed civilians and claimed their victims were guerrilla fighters, so as to meet quotas and secure bonuses.

Ethiopia

COVID-19 pandemic

Against the background of the fight against coronavirus, thousands of Ethiopian migrants who have been expelled from the Middle East and African countries have been placed in quarantine at various university buildings in the country. The total number of these migrants is said to be 5,000, 13 of whom have tested positive, in view of which the health ministry has stated that an immediate return to their native regions is not possible at present. Ethiopia, which has a population of some 110 million, has confirmed 133 cases of COVID-19 and three deaths to date. Experts claim that the public health system could quickly become overstrained, however.

The United Nations (UN) has warned that mass expulsions of illegal immigrants by Saudi Arabia to Ethiopia could increase the spread of the virus and put the overwhelming quarantining efforts at risk. Sources put the number of people affected at around 200,000.

India

COVID-19 pandemic

The nationwide lockdown imposed because of the COVID-19 pandemic is to remain in force until 17.05.20 (cf. BN of 04.05.20). The lockdown has largely paralysed Asia's third-biggest economy. Millions of workers in the informal sector have become unemployed. This has prompted tens of thousands of migrant workers to make their way on foot from the major cities to their home towns. Rail services between New Delhi, Mumbai, Bangalore and Chennai are to be resumed gradually from 12.05.20. Small shops have been allowed to re-open, subject to compliance with hygiene regulations. Some offices have also resumed work since 04.05.20, with a fraction of the usual workforce. On 07.05.20 the government launched a programme to repatriate up to 15.000 Indian nationals from twelve countries.

Kashmir: Rebel leader killed

Riyaz Naikoo, leader of the largest separatist movement in the region, Hizb-ul-Mujahideen, was killed together with three other insurgents in a military operation in the Pulwama district on 05.05.20. His corpse was not handed over to family members for burial, but was instead buried by security forces directly after his death. The former maths teacher joined the resistance movement against the central government in New Delhi in 2012. In 2016 he became the movement's leader, succeeding Burhan Wani, who had been killed in the same year. News of Naikoo's death sparked several days of protests. Several dozen people were injured and at least one killed. The internet and mobile communications remain shut down in the region.

Iran

Sailors killed in navy exercise

The military reported on 11.05.20 that 19 sailors had been killed and 15 soldiers injured when the auxiliary ship Konowar accidently came under fire from Iran's own troops during exercises by the Iranian navy in the Gulf of Oman. Domestically produced rockets are reportedly being tested in the military exercises in the Persian Gulf and the Gulf of Oman.

COVID-19 pandemic

The country has been particularly severely affected by coronavirus in the past 111 days. According to information from the health ministry, more than 6,500 people have died as a result of infection with the virus to date. More than 105,000 people have been infected, 85,000 of whom are now considered cured of the illness, however. 70 % of the economy has reportedly been brought to a standstill by the pandemic.

Iran is also introducing initial steps to ease the lockdown. Government offices and low-risk shops have been allowed to re-open since mid-April, for example. Hairdressing salons and beauty parlours have also reopened after more than two months.

Tasnimnews reports that Friday sermons are to be allowed again in 157 towns and cities as of 08.05.20, adding

that this is taking place in accordance with the official health plan. President Rohani has reportedly announced that mosques in the corona-free "white" zones will be allowed to re-open as of 04.05.20. This applies to 132 towns and cities.

Shrines and large mosques remain closed, however, although access to the outer courts may be permitted again by the end of May 2020. "The option of opening the outer courts of the mausoleums after the fasting month of Ramadan (on 23 May in Iran) subject to certain hygiene regulations is under consideration," said health minister Saeid Namaki. In the four main mausoleums and at larger mosques in the country there are outer courts where pilgrims spend time before or after visiting the shrines. The closure of the mausoleums and mosques led to fierce discussions in the country between the clergy and the scientists at the health ministry. Minister Namaki and his team were of the view that restrictions on contact at the shrines would be unenforceable, however, and that opening the shrines could lead to a new wave of infections.

Clash in western Iran claims lives

Tasnimnews reported on 06.05.20 that fighting had occurred in Kurdistan province between anti-revolutionary forces and the Revolutionary Guards. According to the report, several people were killed on the enemy side and three soldiers belonging to the Revolutionary Guards died. The news agency noted that the Revolutionary Guards' duties include defending the borders in the north-west and south-east of the country.

Arrested students accused of having links to MEK

Three weeks after the arrest of two students of the elite Sharif University of Technology in Teheran, the judicial authorities have announced the charges which they face. Justice ministry spokesperson Gholamhossein Esmailie stated on 05.05.20 that the students were accused of attempted sabotage and having links to the MEK opposition group (Mujahedin-e Khalq: People's Mujahedin of Iran). He claimed that the arrested students had attempted to stir up unrest in the country by sabotage during the corona crisis. In 2018, one of the students won the Gold Medal with the Iranian team at the International Astronomy Olympiad. Arrests in similar circumstances are no rare occurrence in Iran.

Iraq

Formation of a new government

On 07.05.20, parliament passed a vote of confidence in the new prime minister, former secret service chief Mustafa al-Kasimi, and approved 15 ministers of his cabinet. Al-Kasimi is seen as a compromise candidate.

Protests

There were renewed protests in Baghdad on 10.05.20. Just days after a new government had been elected, the demonstrators called for political reforms, a better standard of life and for those responsible for the deaths of hundreds of people in mass protests to be brought to justice.

Security situation

Security incidents unrelated to the protests continue to be reported, with casualties among both the civilian population and the security forces. IS fighters remain active. The Iraqi security forces continue to carry out security operations against IS fighters.

COVID-19 pandemic

As per 10.05.20, the World Health Organisation (WHO) had confirmed 2.676 cases of COVID-19 infections, 107 deaths and 1,702 people who had recovered from the disease in Iraq. Around 15 % of the cases have been recorded in the Kurdistan-Iraq (KR-I) region.

Kenya

Cattle markets closed in border area

On 08.05.20 the ministry of agriculture and livestock closed all cattle markets along the borders with Somalia and Tanzania in order to prevent the spread of COVID-19. By way of explanation, the ministry stated that all nine COVID-19 cases confirmed to date in Wajir County in the north-east of the country originated from Somalia. All livestock dealers have been called on to observe the necessary distancing, improve the hygiene conditions

and wear face masks before the markets can be re-opened.

Mali

UN soldiers killed

Three UN soldiers were killed and at least four injured when their vehicle was hit by an explosive device while on patrol in Aguelhok (Kidal region) on 10.05.20. No-one has claimed responsibility for the attack to date.

Montenegro

NGO demands state protection for environmental activist

According to media reports, the non-governmental organisation (NGO) Human Rights Action is calling on the authorities to prevent attacks on environmental campaigner Ratko Pajovic. Ratko Pajovic is active at ecologically endangered Lake Skadar. On 07.05.20 his house at the lake was the object of an arson attack. Prior to this attack, Pajovic had been the target of repeated threats, including damage to his car in Podgorica, and the victim of vandalism which the police have yet to shed any light on. Illegal fishers are suspected of being behind the attacks. He is reportedly calling for the authorities to intervene because he fears further armed attacks on his person. The national park's administrative chief, Elvir Klica, has also called on the government authorities to protect Pajovic as an important partner to the park rangers in fighting to preserve the lake. The police have reportedly announced that they intend to establish the facts behind the arson attack.

Nepal

COVID-19 pandemic: Returnees prevented from entering the country

Since the border between Nepal and India was closed due to COVID-19 at the end of March 2020, hundreds of Nepalese have been waiting at the border crossing points in the hope that the central government will permit them to enter their native country. To date, there has been no decision by the government on how to deal with returnees, around half of whom have already completed a mandatory two-week quarantine period. India is calling on its neighbouring country to open the border for these people, who are taking temporary shelter from rain and storms in schools and health centres.

Niger

Renewed attacks

Armed clashes between Boko Haram fighters and government troops occurred in Diffa, the largest city in the south-west of the country, on 03.05.20. The jihadists have claimed that this was a successful attack on a military camp, which they "overran". Local residents told the AFP news agency that the attackers had been repelled. A propaganda video released by Islamic State West Africa Province (ISWAP), a breakaway faction of Boko Haram which is affiliated with so-called IS, allegedly shows heavily armed insurgents storming an army camp after sustained fighting and heavy exchanges of fire. Security sources have confirmed the attack without providing any details. The defence minister has told AFP that an official statement will follow in due course. The governor of the western region of Tillaberi, Tidjani Ibrahim Katiella, has announced that unknown assailants on motorcycles killed 20 villagers in a series of attacks in the region on 10.05.20. According to the governor, they attacked three villages, looted shops, grain and livestock and then withdrew in a northerly direction. A local source named villages such as Gadabo, Zibane Koira-Zeno and Zibane-Tegui, all of which are administrated from Anzourou, a town some 50 kilometres from Tillaberi and 100 kilometres from the border with Mali. UN Secretary-General António Guterres warned last week that jihadist groups were exploiting the COVID-19 pandemic in the Sahel zone to step up attacks. The pandemic has led to the closure of the border between Mali and Mauritania, forcing operations by the so-called G5 Sahel anti-jihadist force to be postponed.

North Macedonia

COVID-19 pandemic: Romany settlements receive EU aid

According to media reports, aid packages have been reaching Romany communities in need of protection in North Macedonia and other countries of the Western Balkans since April 2020 as part of the ROMACTID aid programme launched by the Council of Europe and the EU. The packages, which contain basic foods, food vouchers and hygiene articles, serve to solve the problems which the Romany communities face as a result of the corona crisis. It is reported that local ROMACTID teams are coordinating the operations on behalf of the EU and in cooperation with the competent local authorities, informing North Macedonia's ministry of employment and social affairs about the current situation on the ground. The reports argue that government regulations on social distancing must be squared with support measures offering solidarity for particularly vulnerable groups.

Central Council of Sinti and Roma: Romanies at increased risk of discrimination

A press release by the Central Council of Sinti and Roma claims that the COVID-19 pandemic places Romanies at increased risk of discrimination. It cites a case at the end of March 2020 in which nine Romany musicians were the only people from a group of 200 to be detained at the border on returning to the country and placed in quarantine, although they showed no symptoms of infection with COVID-19.

Pakistan

COVID-19 pandemic

A gradual easing of the lockdown has been in progress since 09.05.20. Punjab province has extended the lockdown for a further three weeks, with exemptions for certain sectors of industry and small shops. Larger shops, educational establishments, restaurants and hotels remain closed in the province. A ban on large-scale events remains in place. Following the initial relaxations, the re-opened markets drew large crowds throughout the country.

850,000 volunteers have registered with the Tiger Force since 31.03.20. This aid programme, which has been set up to mitigate the socio-economic consequences of the corona crisis, supplies food and other essential items to the poorest members of society, such as day labourers. According to a United Nations (UN) study from 2016, almost 40 % of the population is affected by poverty.

Pakistan has launched a programme to repatriate tens of thousands of Pakistani nationals from the Gulf States. Friday prayers are being held during the current Ramadan fasting month. Despite the package of measures agreed with the government (cf. BN of 27.04.20), hygiene rules are commonly ignored and the required minimum distance is rarely observed. Opening mosques in this way during the COVID-19 pandemic is without parallel in the Muslim world.

Russian Federation

Human rights commissioner: Sharp rise in domestic violence

On 05.05.20 the Russian Federation's human rights commissioner, Tatjana Moskalkova, told the RIA Novosti news agency that domestic violence against women had increased sharply in April 2020. She said that an analysis of data from non-governmental organisations had revealed a more than two-fold increase in reported cases of domestic violence in April 2020 compared to the previous month, adding that a large number of unreported cases is to be assumed. Restrictions to contain coronavirus have been tightened in the country since the beginning of April 2020. Experts had warned that the restrictions on freedom of movement imposed by the government combined with economic and social strains resulting from the pandemic may raise levels of domestic violence. Domestic violence against women is widespread in the country.

Serbia/Montenegro

Democratic shortcomings

Serbia and Montenegro are among the countries which are classified as so-called 'hybrid regimes' rather than democracies in a report entitled 'Nations in Transit 2020' which was published by the non-governmental organisation Freedom House on 06.05.20. The report attributes this classification to falling standards in the areas

of governance, justice, elections and media freedom. In a statement to mark the publication, a representative of Freedom House said that Montenegro and Serbia had long had weak institutions and that the re-classification was the result of a gradual process of deterioration. The report focuses in particular on conditions in countries in eastern and south-eastern Europe, using a points system to classify the countries according to five categories: consolidated democracies, semi-consolidated democracies, transitional or hybrid regimes, semi-consolidated authoritarian regimes and consolidated authoritarian regimes.

Somalia

Kenyan aircraft shot down

A Kenyan-owned African Express aircraft carrying humanitarian and medical relief supplies was shot down in Bardale, Bay region in Somalia on 20.04.05. The six people on board were killed. The Ethiopian military acknowledged that it had shot down the aircraft on 09.05.20. The military explained they thought the plane was on a "potential suicide mission" as they had no information on the aircraft and it was flying low. Ethiopian troops are stationed at a military base in Bardale.

Al-Shabaab executes alleged spy

Al-Shabaab reportedly executed a man in public in the Adan Yabal district of the Middle Shabelle region on 03.05.20. The man was accused of spying for the US Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) and the military.

Syria

Attack on security forces in Daraa

There have been consistent reports by state media and the Syrian Observatory for Human Rights of an exchange of fire in Muzayrib, a village close to the border with Jordan, on 04.05.20. According to the reports, unknown attackers abducted nine police officers, shot them dead and left them in a street.

Daraa province, where the Syrian civil war began in March 2011, has witnessed regular attacks on government security forces since the rebels were forced to give up control of the territory in July 2018.

Renewed fighting in the north-west

On 10.05.20 an attack on government troops was launched from the final rebel stronghold, whose territory extends over parts of the provinces of Idlib, Aleppo and Hama. Around three dozen fighters were reportedly killed in the attack. This represented the heaviest fighting since the government's campaign to recapture the rebel territories was suspended at the beginning of March 2020 under the terms of an agreement between Russia and Turkey.

Supporters of Horas ad-Din allegedly made up a large faction on the rebel side. This group, which categorically rejects any truce with the government, is the result of a breakaway from Hayat Tahrir al-Sham, the predominant militia organisation in the remaining rebel territories.

Turkey

COVID-19 pandemic

As the number of new infections with coronavirus in Turkey is slowly levelling off, the government is planning a gradual easing of the numerous existing restrictions. Last weekend, an extensive lockdown only applied in 24 cities and provinces, as opposed to the previous total of 31. Senior citizens aged 65 and over were allowed to leave their home for four hours, for the first time since 21.03.20. Shops, shopping centres, hairdressing salons and other businesses are to be allowed to re-open on 11.05.20, subject to compliance with certain conditions. The government has stated that it intends to lift travel restrictions for further provinces following the meeting of the corona science council on 11.05.20.

In a second phase, from June to August 2020, lockdown measures are to be scaled down on a step-by-step basis and the number of days on which citizens aged over 65 are allowed out is to be increased. The mosques are then also to be re-opened, duly observing the necessary distancing. Face masks remain mandatory.

In June 2020, restaurants and cafés are to be allowed to re-open, subject to certain restrictions, as are libraries. Sports events could be resumed, but without spectators and subject to compliance with specific safety and hygiene standards.

Cinemas, theatres and open-air venues may be able to re-open in July 2020. The government is also considering allowing larger events again, such as weddings, subject to specific conditions.

A third phase is to run from September 2020 to the end of the year. Detailed plans are to be drawn up for this phase, to enable schools and universities to re-open, subject to compliance with the safety and hygiene measures. In a fourth phase, all travel and flying restrictions and the obligation to wear masks are then to be lifted. The government is also considering options for allowing tourists into the country from June 2020, with corona tests to be carried out at airports.

Report on possible refugee movements

According to a report in the Die Welt daily newspaper on 08.05.20, the European Border and Coast Guard Agency (Frontex) is again expecting a large number of refugees at the Greek-Turkish border. According to an internal and confidential situation report from the Frontex Situation Centre dated 05.05.20 which has been obtained by the newspaper, mass movements of migrants could take place from Turkey in the direction of Greece as soon as further Turkish provinces ease their coronavirus restrictions.

Ukraine

Former Georgian head of state Saakashvili in Ukraine

Ukraine's president Selenski appointed the former Georgian head of state and governor of the port of Odessa, Michail Saakashvili, as chairman of the presidential reform committee on 07.05.2020. While his future responsibilities are as yet unclear, the 52 year-old is to drive the reform process in the country forward and add fresh impetus to efforts in this area. It was initially planned to offer him the post of deputy head of government for reforms. Majority support in parliament was reportedly lacking for this plan, however. Georgia has recalled its ambassador from Kiev in protest, as legal proceedings are still pending against Saakashvili in his native country.

Venezuela

Arrests following alleged attempted invasion

According to media reports, 45 people have been arrested to date in connection with an alleged attempted invasion. Armed men allegedly landed on a Venezuelan beach on the morning of 03.05.20. It is claimed that the attackers came from Colombia. There are reports of an ensuing exchange of fire, in the course of which eight people were killed. According to the Venezuelan regime, the attack was successfully repelled. The arrested people are charged with terrorism, conspiracy, illegal arms trafficking and forming a criminal organisation. Two former US soldiers are believed to be among those arrested. Venezuela's head of state, Nicolás Maduro, sees the USA as being behind the attack and is comparing the incident to the Bay of Pigs invasion, in which Cuban exiles attempted to bring down the Cuban government headed by Fidel Castro in 1961 with the support of the USA. The USA have denied any involvement in the alleged attempt to invade Venezuela. The incident occurred against the backdrop of a more stringent sanction policy directed against Venezuela by the USA. Maduro's opponents suspect that the incident was stage-managed as a further pretext for repressive measures against opposition figures.

Western Balkans

EU-Western Balkans summit

The COVID-19 pandemic dominated the political agenda at the EU-Western Balkans summit, which was held in virtual form on 06.05.20. Ahead of the summit, the EU provided Albania, Bosnia-Herzegovina, Kosovo, North Macedonia, Serbia and Montenegro with an initial aid package to the sum of 3.3 billion euros to help cope with the pandemic and its consequences. A corresponding statement points out that the aid package comprises funds for the health sector and to support the necessary social and economic recovery. The summit did not yield any direct progress with regard to the sluggish EU accession process. In the current crisis, the Western Balkan countries have stood out by virtue of their particularly drastic protection measures against COVID-19.

Yemen

COVID-19 pandemic: first cases in rebel-held territories

The Houthi rebels have reported the first cases in the northern territories. Two persons have reportedly become infected with coronavirus and one of them has died.

In the south of the country 51 cases have been reported, including eight deaths, most of which have occurred in Aden. The United Nations (UN) is concerned that the spread of the virus will go undetected in the country, as only extremely minimal testing capacities are available.

Fighting in Marib and Al Bayda

There have been reports of sustained fighting between the Houthi rebels and forces allied with the Yemeni government on the front lines in the administrative districts of Marib and Al Bayda. The Houthi rebels accuse the Saudi-led coalition of having flown hundreds of air raids, including on the capital, Sana'a. Dozens of people have reportedly been killed on both sides.

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