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Security Threats Affecting People Exiting Criminal Groups in Colombia

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MANAGING EXITS
FROM ARMED CONFLICT

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KEY FINDINGS

- Sixty per cent of respondents reported that they had been threatened by an armed actor – almost always their former group – since entering the differential assistance process.
- More than half of all respondents stated that they had had to change their place of residence due to these threats. More than a third of threatened respondents stated that the threats negatively affected their access to the differential assistance process.
- Those who were threatened also took other measures to protect themselves, including changing their phone number, limiting their movements to essential activities, and moving away from their family to minimize risks to family members.

This Report, and the research that supported it, were undertaken as part of UNU-CPR and UNIDIR's Managing Exits from Armed Conflict (MEAC) project. MEAC is a multi-donor, multi-partner initiative to develop a unified, rigorous approach to examining how and why individuals exit armed conflict and evaluating the efficacy of interventions meant to support their transitions. While the Findings Report benefited from feedback from MEAC's donors and institutional partners, it does not necessarily represent their official policies or positions.

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Background

About MEAC

How and why do individuals exit armed groups, and how do they do so sustainably, without falling back into conflict cycles? These questions are at the core of UNU-CPR and UNIDIR's Managing Exits from Armed Conflict (MEAC) initiative. MEAC is a multi-year, multi-partner collaboration that aims to develop a unified, rigorous approach to examining how and why individuals exit armed conflict and evaluating the efficacy of interventions meant to support their transition to civilian life. MEAC seeks to inform evidence-based programme design and implementation in real time to improve efficacy. At the strategic level, the cross-programme, cross-agency lessons that will emerge from the growing MEAC evidence base will support more effective conflict resolution and peacebuilding efforts. The MEAC project and accompanying case studies are supported by the Norwegian Ministry of Foreign Affairs; Switzerland's Federal Department of Foreign Affairs (FDFA); the UK Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office (FCDO); the Irish Department of Foreign Affairs; the UN Development Programme (UNDP); and the International Organization for Migration (IOM); and is being run in partnership with the Secretariat of the Regional Strategy for Stabilization, Recovery and Resilience; UN Department of Peace Operations (DPO); UNICEF; and the World Bank.

About this Series

The MEAC findings report series seeks to put evidence about conflict prevention, conflict transitions, and related interventions into the hands of policymakers and practitioners in real time. The reports present short overviews of findings (or emerging findings) across a wide range of thematic areas and include analyses on their political or practical implications for the UN and its partners.

About this Report

This report is based on data collected as part of original survey research conducted with individuals formerly associated with criminal groups – including FARC dissident groups – who were interviewed between April and September 2022. This survey took place thanks to the cooperation agreement established between MEAC and the Reincorporation and Normalization Agency (ARN by its Spanish acronym) in Colombia; MEAC is grateful to the ARN for its collaboration in this work. The interviews took place in three cities in Colombia – Bogotá, Medellín, and Cali – where the ex-associates were participating in the differential assistance process led by the ARN. The survey inquired about their conflict experiences and their transition to civil life, economic situation, personal security, psychosocial vulnerabilities, and support networks. This report focuses on security threats that affect the exit process in ways that could increase the likelihood of recidivism and decrease the likelihood that participants make full, sustained, and positive transitions to civilian life. If this process is unable

to support successful transitions out of armed groups, it will not achieve the goal of winnowing the ranks of – and ultimate dismantling – active armed groups. These findings may be useful to the Colombian government and other governments, UN, and NGO partners working to address conflict and build peace amidst the changing landscape of insecurity and vulnerability in Colombia. The report ends with an examination of key policy and programmatic implications of these findings.

Criminal Groups in Colombia

Overview

As with other negotiated settlements, the 2016 peace agreement between the Government of Colombia and the FARC-EP helped demobilize many armed elements. However, it also led to the emergence of other armed groups, in addition to those whose operations had begun years before. Some of the FARC "dissident" groups emerged before and after the peace negotiations as a result of their leaders' separation from the FARC-EP command and from the peace agreement. Others, such as the "Pelusos", the "Caparros", and the "Clan del Golfo", appeared earlier, in the context of previous disarmament, demobilization, and reintegration (DDR) processes and patterns of insecurity. In the wake of the agreement, these diverse set of armed groups continued to benefit from illegal sources of financing and vied for control of territories previously controlled by the FARC-EP.

These groups – defined broadly within the Colombian justice system as criminal groups who are not legally considered parties to the conflict in Colombia – present significant threats to the consolidation of peace and security in the country. They thrive in regions characterized by poverty, illicit economies, and ineffective territorial control by State authorities, particularly the departments of Chocó, Putumayo, Cauca, Nariño, and Arauca. Confrontations between these groups who battle for territorial control and a stake in these economies, and between the groups and military in the communities in which they are present, have resulted in displacement and other humanitarian and security concerns. For example, the UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA) registered the forced displacement of more than 400,000 people between 2016 and the end of 2020.[1]

In addition, between January and April 2022, armed groups have implemented 20 "confinements" (in which communities are unable to leave their towns or villages), affecting 41,484 people (9,890 families), mostly from indigenous and Afro-Colombian communities in Chocó.[2] Other reports highlight sexual violence, child recruitment, and other violations by armed groups including criminal

[1] United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (UNOCHA), "About OCHA Colombia," last accessed 29 September 2022.
[2] United Nations, Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, "Confinamientos en Colombia - Enero a abril 2022," Fact Sheet, 25 July 2022.

organizations.[3] These groups have also carried out attacks against the armed forces in various regions of the country.[4] Furthermore, as of July 2022, a total of 379 former FARC-EP combatants have been victims of homicide, attempted homicide, or disappearance since the signature of the peace agreement, of whom at least 80 per cent were targeted by armed groups including FARC dissident groups, the Clan del Golfo, and the National Liberation Army (ELN) (the latter is not considered a criminal group).[5]

As part of its work to reduce insecurity – especially in rural areas – under the peace agreement, the national Government has taken several measures to address the threat posed by these groups. The Duque administration (2018-2022) placed great emphasis on a militarized approach that aimed to break groups down by "neutralizing" or killing their members, especially their leaders. Simultaneously, the Duque administration also created policies that aimed to dismantle these criminal groups by encouraging defection. In July 2020, the Duque administration adopted Decree 975, which aims to motivate individuals to leave these groups by offering them social and economic incentives.[6] The Decree establishes economic benefits and psychosocial support for former members of these groups who join a reintegration or "differential assistance" process led by the Reincorporation and Normalization Agency (known by its Spanish acronym, ARN).[7] As of the most recent publicly available information from May 2022, 375 people had left criminal groups and joined the differential assistance process. Of these, 249 had exited the "FARC dissident groups", 112 had left the "Clan del Golfo", eight had left the "Caparros", and 6 had left the "Pelusos".[8]

The differential assistance process led by the ARN begins with a 12-month transition period (called an Engagement and Adaptation Period) that provides ex-combatants with basic services. Once the transition stage is over, the ex-combatants enter the accompaniment route, where activities fall into 11 categories: 1) personal development; 2) productive development; 3) family support (something that differentiates this programme from previous and ongoing Colombian reintegration programmes); 4) residence and housing; 5) health; 6) education; 7) education for work and human development; 8) security; 9) community; 10) culture of legality; 11) legal support. In some cases, these activities are implemented by the ARN itself; in others, the ARN supports the individual to initiate engagement with other Government entities, such as health service providers. Similar to the roadmaps used in other reintegration processes in Colombia, the ARN uses an "action plan" that includes activities ex-combatants from criminal groups must accomplish with the advice of professionals in the ARN in order to finish the differential assistance process.[9]

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[3] United Nations, Verification Mission in Colombia, "Infographic Report of the Secretary-General on the UN Verification Mission in Colombia," fact sheet, 28 March 2022, S/2022/267.
[4] Caracol Radio, "Siguen los enfrentamientos entre el Ejército y grupos criminales en el Caquetá", 31 July 2021.
[5] United Nations Security Council, "United Nations Verification Mission in Colombia, Report of the Secretary-General," United Nations, 27 June 2022, S/2022/513.
[6] Organized Armed Groups (GAO), in accordance with the provisions of Law 1908 of 2018 and Directive 15-2016, are considered to be those that, under the direction of a responsible commander, exercise such control over a part of the territory that it allows them to carry out sustained and concerted military operations. Colombia, Decree 965 (2020).
[7] ARN is the government office that has accompanied and provided permanent advice to those ex-combatants transitioning to civilian life in Colombia.
[8] Presidencia de la República de Colombia, "Empalme Gobierno Nacional", July 2022.
[9] Colombia, Agencia para la Reincorporación y la Normalización (ARN), "Período de vinculación y adaptación del proceso de atención diferencial", PowerPoint presentation, January 2021.

This comprehensive set of components appears to comprise a potentially effective intervention, but there are major challenges to the implementation of this programme, from institutional obstacles that prevent clarity on the legal status of process participants (the subject of an upcoming MEAC report) to issues stemming from the fact that it is being implemented in a context of ongoing violence. Chief among these challenges are security threats to process participants, the focus of this report. MEAC's research found that individuals in the differential assistance process face frequent security threats, including threats from armed groups. These ever-present threats highlight the challenges of making the transition to civilian life amidst ongoing violence and when ex-combatants' former armed groups are still active. Such threats have the potential to jeopardize the transition to civilian life and the physical safety of ex-combatants. Threats may cause them to flee their municipalities of residence and lose contact with the ARN, interrupting the support they receive. Moreover, threats may incentivize ex-combatants to return to an armed group, potentially exposing them to physical violence including death. To understand these threats and how they affect transitions to civilian life, the MEAC project set out to analyse the experiences of ex-combatants who are currently in the differential assistance process.

Findings

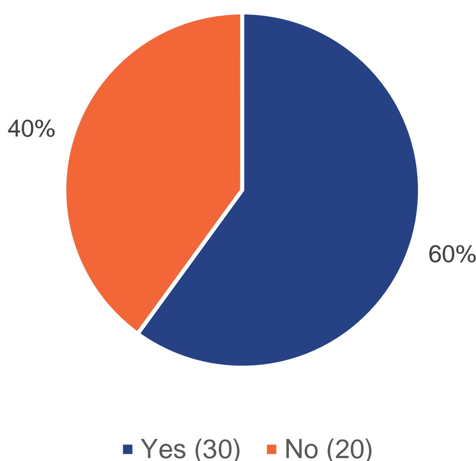
The following report provides an overview of security threats affecting current participants in the differential assistance process, based on survey data collected between April and September 2022, thanks to cooperation between MEAC and the ARN. MEAC and its implementing research partner in Colombia, Fundación Conflict Responses, conducted a 60-minute survey with a sample of 50 ex-combatants from criminal groups residing in Bogotá D.C., Medellín, and Cali. Respondents were asked a series of questions about their experiences before they entered their armed group, their lives within the group, experiences in the conflict, current well-being (e.g., psychological, economic), and perceptions of the differential assistance programme, among other topics. This series of questions was designed to understand how and why ex-members of criminal groups enter the differential assistance process for the purpose of informing policy and programming aimed at these organizations. This report focuses specifically on security threats faced by differential assistance programme participants and how they impact their efforts to transition to civilian life, including their participation in the differential assistance process itself.

This research is based on a small, hard to access sample and the findings drawn from it are likely influenced by the sample's makeup. The sample was mostly composed of young men between the ages of 18 and 50. Twenty one of the 50 respondents (42 per cent) self-identified as Afro-Colombian and a small number of other respondents self-identified as indigenous. Most of the respondents were born in the Colombian Pacific region and spent their time in armed groups in various parts of the country before beginning their transition to civilian life. Most had exited the Clan del Golfo (26 people or 52 per cent) or one of the FARC dissident groups (19 people or 38 per cent). Other groups represented in the sample included the Pelusos (three people or 6 per cent) and the Caparros (2 people or 4 per cent).

Findings on Security Threats among Process Participants

Security threats have been identified as a key challenge to the success of processes that support the transition to civilian life all over the world, including in Colombia.[10] In conversations with practitioners in Colombia about this particular group of ex-combatants, the MEAC team became aware that the differential assistance process is highly affected by security threats, specifically threats against process participants issued by armed groups. This became apparent to the researchers when carrying out the survey with this population; many interview appointments were cancelled or rescheduled due to the ongoing threats received by individuals in this process. Scheduling changes seemingly made to reduce the risk to participants, highlighted the impact that these threats can have on participants' daily lives. It was therefore unsurprising that, when asked whether they had been threatened by an armed actor since entering the process, 60 per cent (30 of 50 respondents) said yes.

Figure 1 – "Have you been threatened by an armed actor since you entered the differential assistance programme?"



Almost all of the 30 people who had received threats appeared to be threatened by the group from which they had exited. For example, 18 of the 30 had exited the Clan del Golfo. Of those 18, 17 believed that the threats had been issued by the same group. One believed that the threats had come from the Autodefensas Unidas de Colombia (AUC), a defunct organization whose name is still used to indicate any group stemming from the paramilitary organizations, including the Clan del Golfo and its subsidiaries. Similarly, 11 of the 30 who received threats since entering the process had exited the FARC dissident groups. Of these, nine said that the threats they received were issued by the same groups they had exited from; the other two also said that the threats had come from the AUC.

[10] Oliver Kaplan and Enzo Nussio, "Explaining Recidivism of Ex-combatants in Colombia," *Journal of Conflict Resolution*, Vol 62, No.1 (May 2016): pp. 64–93.

This is consistent with anecdotal evidence that MEAC collected in the course of consultations on this project, which suggested that certain active criminal groups threaten to kill or hurt former members frequently. The goal of these groups is to prevent individuals from sharing information about them with the authorities, particularly the military. The leaders of these armed groups know from previous processes in Colombia that the military often asks for information about group operations as part of their engagement with those defecting. In the case of the differential assistance process, in particular, they may be aware that the process *requires* "collaboration" with State entities (specifically the Attorney General's Office and the Ministry of Defense) in the form of information-sharing in order to receive judicial benefits that are decided by the relevant prosecutor on a case-by-case basis, and can include reduced sentences, house arrest instead of prison time, and conditions on liberty. They, therefore, issue threats as a preventive measure, in an effort to scare individuals into silence.

Security threats also affect individuals before they enter armed groups, contributing to a continuum of risk before, during, and after association. Two thirds of respondents who received threats after entering the differential assistance process had also received threats before entering the criminal group with which they had been associated. Furthermore, 14 per cent (seven of 50 respondents) indicated that they had joined the criminal group of which they were part "for personal safety." implying that they joined either to escape a threat or because they felt the group would provide them with protection. It's also possible that individuals joined because of a combination of these two motivations. This shows the role that threats can play before, during, and after association with an armed group. In terms of security threats during their time within an armed group, open-ended answers on individuals' experiences provided insights into instances of harassment and violence. For example, one participant stated that he disliked his time in the group because "they started to kill my companions and give the [young ones] drugs." Another stated that the group "applied [internal] punishments without any fair reason." These testimonies show that although security threats threaten ex-combatants' participation in the differential assistance process, such threats have often been a part of their entire trajectory through armed group life, since before joining the group itself.

Another historically common impact of security threats in Colombia is displacement. People change their place of residence in response to security threats and other threats related to the conflict, most often to another town or city where they perceive that security threats are lower – perhaps because there is less activity by armed groups or because they are unknown to other community members and so can lead an "anonymous" life.[11] MEAC, therefore, inquired into differential assistance process participants' experiences of displacement or changes in residence both before and after their time in the criminal group.[12] Receiving threats impact the ability of ex-combatants to access programme support. More than half of all respondents in the total sample (26 of 50) stated that they had had to change their place of residence due to threats since entering the differential assistance process. Of those who received threats, 60 per cent (18 out of 30) stated that they had changed their place of

[11] Myriam Denov and Ines Marchand, "'I Can't Go Home'. Forced migration and displacement following demobilisation: The complexity of reintegrating former child soldiers in Colombia," *Intervention,* Vol 12, No. 3 (November 2014): pp. 331-343.

[12] It should also be noted that the majority of respondents – 64 per cent (32 out of 50) – stated that they had been displaced before joining an armed group. This may suggest that displacement puts individuals at greater risk of entering armed groups, as has been discussed in the existing literature. See Ibid.

residence due to security issues. In other cases, respondents indicated that they limited their movements to protect themselves. Almost 37 per cent (11 of the 30 threatened respondents) stated that the threats negatively affected access to the differential assistance process and their ability to meet with ARN professionals. Changing place of residence and not being able to leave home were two ways in which respondents identified that the threats had affected their assistance process.

Several Colombian institutions have measures in place to address the security threats faced by individuals leaving armed groups, including those who have left criminal groups and are participating in the differential assistance process. For example, the ARN and the National Protection Unit (known by its Spanish acronym, UNP) coordinate actions to deal with threats against ex-combatants or their families. This coordinated process begins with a threat assessment and involves the implementation of protection measures. In addition, the National Police can provide preventive measures to the affected person, such as patrolling their neighbourhood or conducting a threat assessment and recommending steps the individual can take to protect themselves and their families.[13] In addition, the Special Investigation Unit of the Attorney General's Office is charged with the administration of justice in cases of attacks against ex-combatants, including those from criminal groups.[14] Conversations with practitioners and others with experience of implementing the differential assistance process, however, suggest that these measures are not quick to respond to cases in which individuals are at risk.[15] Practitioners suggested that even when they know that participants have reported threats to the relevant authorities, the entities that should take action often do not respond, or act so slowly that by the time protection measures have been enacted the individual concerned has moved to another city or dropped out of the programme.

Despite having recently exited criminal groups, ex-combatants in the differential assistance process appear willing to approach Colombian authorities when they are threatened. Most of those who received threats (25 out of 30, or 83 per cent) stated that they reported their experience to the authorities. In order to understand why some respondents did not report the threats they received to the authorities, the MEAC survey asked open-ended follow-up questions to clarify these points. One reason that respondents gave for not having reported these threats included the perception that the authorities were seeking to arrest the respondent. One respondent said: "The police want to capture me," indicating nervousness about the possibility of identifying himself to the authorities in this way, and highlighting one of the effects of conflicting messages on the legal status of participants in this process, which MEAC will address in a separate report. In contrast, in one specific case that should be considered an outlier, the respondent seemed to think that the threats might not present a significant problem, stating "I do not see the seriousness of the threat."

In addition to reporting threats to the authorities, half of the respondents who had been threatened said they took other measures to protect themselves. Among the measures mentioned by

[13] Colombia, Agencia para la Reincorporación y la Normalización (ARN), *Cartilla de Prevención y Seguridad*, (Bogotá, 2019).
[14] Colombia, Oficina del Alto Comisionado para la Paz, *Acuerdo Final para la Terminación del Conflicto y la Construcción de una Paz Estable y Duradera* (2016).
[15] Background interviews with practitioners, Bogotá, July 2022.

respondents were changing their cell phone number, only moving around the city for essential activities, and moving away from their family in order to minimize the risk to family members.

Respondents worried that they faced threats as a direct result of the information that they had shared with authorities as part of their entry into the differential assistance process. Several respondents reported that when they interacted with the military before entering the ARN process, they were asked to provide intelligence about the group from which they had exited. In some cases, respondents said they were even asked to accompany military units as they carried out operations against their former group. They felt that this had exposed them to additional risk because their former group was more likely to know that they had been collaborating with the military. They were distrustful and wary of interaction with State institutions. This may have affected the likelihood that they would report threats. Further conversations with practitioners highlighted that this type of interaction with the military often had an impact on their engagement in the differential process.[16] Ex-combatants who had been asked to share information were reportedly often distrustful of the practitioners working in the differential assistance process – a side effect that could affect their participation in the process overall.[17]

The MEAC project data suggest that these security threats affect respondents' perceptions of safety and security. Of the 30 people who had received threats since entering the differential assistance process, 87 per cent (26 of the 30) said they were afraid of being hurt or killed even ,though they had left their armed group. In contrast, of the non-threatened sample (20 out of 50 respondents), 11 indicated that they were afraid of being hurt or killed. There is evidence that fear is debilitating and impacts basic functioning. The MEAC study has some early evidence that this is what is happening for many in the differential assistance process. In the face of armed group threats, participation is impeded, which has implications for the Government's efforts to use the programme to reduce the strength of criminal groups causing insecurity in Colombia today.

Policy and Programmatic Implications

Colombia is at a critical juncture with regard to decision-making about the future and purpose of the differential assistance process, as more individuals leave criminal – including FARC dissident – groups and the Petro Government takes steps to initiate talks with some of these organizations.[18] The findings presented in this report are therefore especially timely in terms of providing evidence that could help strengthen the differential assistance process after its first two years of operations, and in preparation for increased numbers of individuals exiting criminal groups as talks with the Government progress, if the process is adjusted to make them eligible. As was outlined herein, one of the top concerns for the differential assistance process is dealing with security threats.

[16] Background interviews with practitioners, Bogotá and online, June and July 2022.
[17] Ibid.
[18] Infobae, "Este es el narcoterrorista y disidente que se reunió con el Alto Comisionado de Paz del Gobierno Petro," September 2022.

The data presented herein suggest that individuals in the differential assistance process face security challenges that negatively affect their transitions to civilian life in terms of access to services, trust in institutions, and sustainable participation in the process. These threats, and the measures process participants take to respond to them, put their participation in the process at risk. Change in residence is especially common and has the potential to result in a break with engagement with the ARN. Flexibility in service provision on the part of the ARN could help mitigate the effects of participant displacement, ensuring that services and support continue without interruption, regardless of a participant's location. Services provided by other Government agencies, such as health, should also be accessible at the earliest possible opportunity after relocation. Furthermore, change to places of residence in the face of threats could undermine other aspects of an individual's transition, including proximity to support networks such as families or friends, and access to education and jobs. All of these factors could undermine the progress of an individual's reintegration and increase the chances of adverse outcomes, including recidivism. Some respondents had originally entered a criminal group for personal safety, and it is quite possible that ex-combatants – when faced with threats to their safety upon exit – could choose to rejoin their old group or switch to a new one, if doing so offered them safety. As paradoxical as it seems, participants may feel that rejoining their former group, if possible, may be their best chance to secure protection and end the stress that comes with threats to their personal safety.

To effectively address the threats to current participants and bolster the differential assistance process, it is necessary to strengthen the bonds of trust between process participants and State institutions. Efforts to do so start even before individuals enter the process, when they have recently left a criminal group and are interacting with the military. Respondent experiences highlight that making information exchange a requirement of such interactions can negatively affect participants' trust in the process and make it less likely that they report security threats to the ARN and other authorities. Although short term gains may be made by collecting information from individuals who have recently left these groups, the potential longer-term benefit of dismantling the groups by offering defectors a viable exit pathway is undermined by actions that lead them to question their participation.

Once participants have entered the differential assistance process, measures that could be taken to build trust include additional information sharing on the parameters of requirements to "collaborate" with the State (i.e., make clear that the ARN is not responsible for this requirement). This is crucial so that participants understand the separation of the military from other State institutions and do not feel they have been misled about the steps they need to take in order to fulfil process requirements. This latter point is especially crucial given evidence that process participants' legal situation is unclear not only to them, but also to the institutions involved in the implementation of different aspects of their transition to civilian life – increasing their distrust in the process as they become "sitting ducks" for threats from armed groups while also potentially, and unbeknownst to them, awaiting arrest. To build this trust, communication should be strengthened between the ARN, the Attorney General's Office, and the Ministry of Defense, so that messaging with participants is consistent. Robust and rapid service delivery would also contribute to an increased sense of support

from the ARN, so that participants feel that the institution is indeed seeking to fulfil their needs and establish the conditions to bolster their transition to civilian life.

The response to security threats towards individuals participating in the differential assistance process is multi-faceted and involves several State institutions. Shared responsibility and increased coordination for ensuring that this population is better protected is essential if the process is to succeed in encouraging defections and thus weakening active armed groups and reducing violence in Colombia. In order to be effective, the process should not be designed and implemented in a vacuum. Rather, it should be part of a government-wide strategic plan to dismantle these groups through measures from dialogue to reintegration support and military means, with a clear definition of how each measure interacts with and impacts the other. In this way, objectives and requirements would become interlocking and mutually reinforcing in the longer term, increasing the likelihood of the plan's effectiveness in breaking down criminal groups and advancing peace in Colombia.

MANAGING EXITS
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