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Natal women support objectors

Political Reporter

ABOUT 170 Natal women have backed a national petition calling for alternative non-military forms of national service.

About 1 000 South African women had by yesterday signed the petition, Mrs Anita Kromberg told a Durban Press conference called by Women Against War. Simultaneous Press conferences were held in Johannesburg and Cape Town.

The women belong to several organisations but came together as individuals faced with the same problem, Professor Christine Lucia said.

Mrs Millicent Toms, mother of jailed conscientious objector Dr Ivan Toms, was at the Durban conference.

The women said young men should have the opportunity to decide for themselves what form of national service they should do, and it should be for the same length of time as military service.

Mrs Noreen Ramsden, wife of the dean of the Faculty of Law at Durban-Westville University, and Mrs Penny Haswell, wife of Pietermaritzburg city councillor Rob Haswell, said they had

signed the petition.

Mrs Ramsden said her son Mark had applied to do alternative service. If the Board for Religious Objection accepted his application, he would do six years' community service. If not, "his only alternatives as a young man of integrity is six years in jail or exile".

"A period of six years' community service is pretty harsh for someone who is 24, married, and whose wife is expecting their child in May. I do not know how they are going to survive on the pay of a private, about R660 a month.

"That baby will be six years old before my son can support him or her. After five years' university, he will now have to work under the Department of Manpower for six years. He cannot establish himself in his profession."

Psychologist Miss Gill Eagle said young men should be allowed to serve their country in ways that were in keeping with their own views and value systems.



Call for call-up alternatives

Mrs Millicent Toms, mother of conscientious objector Dr Ivan Toms, cuts a cake, calling for conscripts in South Africa to be given a choice. Yesterday a new grouping, Women Against War, launched a nationwide petition calling for alternatives to conscription.

Women in call for non-army service

DAILY NEWS Political Reporter Feb 7, 1989

ABOUT 1 000 South African women today launched a petition calling for their husbands, sons, brothers and friends to be given the chance to do meaningful non-military form of national service.

In Durban a Press conference called by Women Against War was told that 166 Natal women had so far signed the petition. They included Noreen Ramsden, wife of the dean of the faculty of law at Durban-Westville University, and Mrs Penny Haswell, wife of Pietermaritzburg city councillor, Mr Rob Haswell.

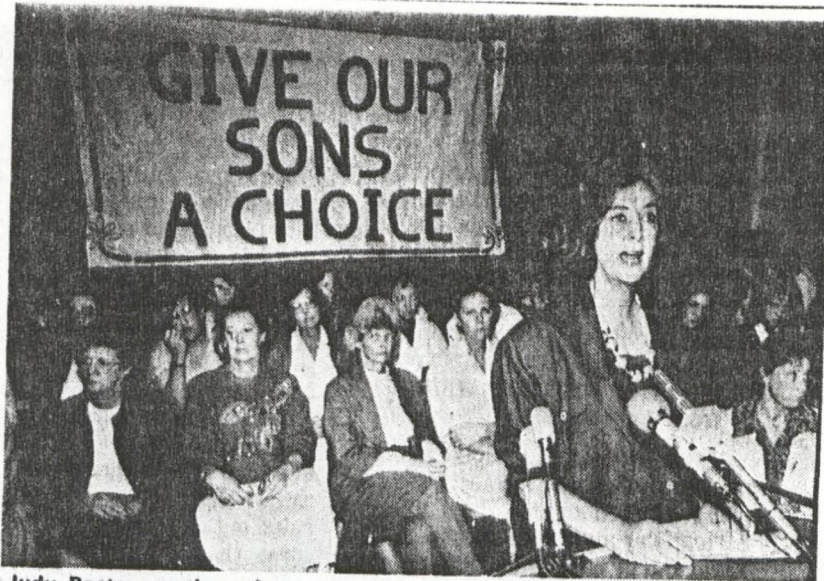
Simultaneous Press conferences were sche-

duled for Johannesburg and Cape Town.

"Religious objectors are punished by a mandatory period of so-called community service," said spokesman Ms Leigh Phipson.

"In reality this means six years of clerical work in State departments with little opportunity of making a meaningful contribution to the community.

"We think there must be better alternatives. We call for alternatives to military service which would enable men to serve South Africa in constructive ways such as true community service and in religious and welfare organisations."



Judy Bester, mother of conscientious objector Charles, addresses a media conference in Johannesburg organised by mothers calling for alternatives to compulsory military service.

Picture: ROBERT BÖTHA

Mums query conscription

THE "appalling" choices available to conscripts who did not wish to serve in the SADF were condemned yesterday by about 850 mothers in three major centres.

They also called for constructive alternatives to military service.

The public declaration by the mothers was in part a response to the jailing of conscientious objectors Ivan Toms, David Bruce and Charles Bester and came in the wake of last year's declaration by 143 conscripts who refused to serve in the SADF.

In a statement read at media conferences in Johannesburg, Cape Town and Durban, the mothers supported those conscripts who questioned the role of

SYLVIA DU PLESSIS
and RICHARD BARTLETT

the SADF and shared their anguish.

They said this stand was not intended as a petition but as an appeal to women to see the demand for legal alternatives to conscription as legitimate.

They said: "Many young men wish to serve their country but ask whether the SADF in the townships and beyond our borders is defending the country they love or the system of apartheid."

They wanted their sons to have the choice of serving in other ways. Alternatives could include assisting in welfare organisations and running basic health programmes.



Ms Avril Hoepner, a Cape Town mother with two sons, addresses a press conference calling on the government to provide alternatives to compulsory military service. More than 800 women around the country attended simultaneous meetings.

Women call for alternative to army

Staff Reporters

Women in Johannesburg, Cape Town and Durban yesterday called on the Government to provide alternatives to military service, during press conferences held in the three major centres.

The women stressed they had come together as mothers, wives, girlfriends and sisters, not as members of any particular organisations.

At the Central Methodist Church in Johannesburg, mothers said in a statement that those young men who refused to serve in the South African Defence Force (SADF) should be permitted to make their contribution to the nation in non-punitive, constructive alternative service.

The message contained in a public declaration signed in all three centres was "give our sons a choice".

Mrs Judy Bester, whose son is serving a six-year jail term for refusing to go to the army, said moth-

ers had the responsibility of inculcating in them the values upheld by their society.

Speaking of her son, Mrs Bester said: "Twenty times a year, for half an hour, I can gaze at him through a glass partition, I can speak to him through a microphone ...

BOTHA WOULD NOT FIGHT

'Mine is the ultimate betrayal. Because of his acceptance of my teaching, he refuses to espouse violent repression. Because I taught him that man is equal in the sight of God, and, therefore, has a right to a say in his own destiny, he is seen by the State to be as great a threat to society as the most hardened of criminals.'

She said that as a young man President Botha had decided not to fight when South Africa declared war on Germany in 1939.

She said Mr Botha availed himself of the option not to fight, yet demanded the blind obedience of today's young men to serve in "his

Defence Force".

● At St George's Cathedral, in Cape Town, more than 200 women called for an alternative to compulsory military service.

The mothers said in a statement that the February call-up had raised dilemmas for them because their sons were faced with conscription into the SADF.

"The choices for them are painful," the statement read. "To leave the country; to be sent to prison for six years; to live in the uncertain world of evasion; or, as religious pacifists, to face six years of Government service."

● In Durban, a group of women calling themselves Women Against War launched a petition calling for their husbands, sons, brothers and friends to be given the chance to do meaningful non-military form of national service.

In a statement, the group said it deplored the effects of conscription on the personal and professional lives of thousands of men and their families.

CP Correspondent

HUNDREDS of South African women this week called for an alternative to compulsory military service for white males at Press conferences held in Cape Town, Johannesburg and Durban.

The joint call, which was endorsed by more than 500 women, is the first public call for an end to conscription since last August, when the government restricted the End Conscription Campaign.

The restrictions on the ECC, in terms of emergency regulations, by Law and Order Minister Adriaan Vlok silenced those calling for an alternative to compulsory military service.

The women said in a joint statement that this month's call-up of thousands of young white men had raised dilemmas for them as mothers because their sons were faced with conscription into the SADF. This heightened their concern.

"We are deeply aware of the traumatic effect conscription has on our sons. For many there is no real choice. They serve - against their will - but question what the SADF is doing in the townships and beyond our borders.

"We suffer with them when they experience emotional scarring and the constant fear of being maimed or killed," they said.

They also suffered with their sons who chose not to serve in the army.

"The choices for them are painful: to leave the country; to be sent to prison for six years; to live in the uncertain world of evasion; or, as religious pacifists or to face six years of government service."

They supported their sons through these choices, but they had to ask themselves: "Is this what we raised them for?"

They did not want to watch their sons to grow up in a land torn by fear and violence, but yearned to see them strive and take their place in building a strong and lasting peace.

"We publicly declare our support for alternatives to compulsory military service."

At Cape Town's St George's Cathedral, four mothers spoke of the anguish and trauma their sons faced when deciding on the choices available to them.

Mother of three boys Scotty Morton said all her sons had been unwillingly conscripted into the SADF.

Her youngest son went straight into the army after leaving school in 1984.

"I felt very unhappy about it because we had not decided for certain what career he intended to follow and he was legally obliged to go," she said.

She noticed that her son's self image was being increasingly damaged.

"I felt powerless because he was very far away and didn't want to talk about his experiences, preferring to go out with friends and forget what was happening."

He called his family from hospital after eight months.

"He had been in hospital for a week and was 'bombed out' on anti-depressants. We were never officially informed

Plea for an alternative to SADF service

Mothers against military call-up

of his hospitalisation. While he was still in hospital we learnt that troops, some of whom had done basics with him, had been sent into Sebokeng, a black township near Johannesburg.

"I was torn apart with concern on the one hand for what was happening to him and a sense of relief that he had not been forced into the townships as others had.

"Township duty was not defending my country from some foreign aggressive force. Our sons were being used against unjust and discriminatory laws right in our own country." Morton said.

He was transferred to Cape Town for medical reasons and spent the rest of his conscription undergoing psychotherapy.

"He and I became increasingly politically and morally aware of what was happening and loathing it, and our relationship became very strained."

She wondered why her son, who was "psychologically damaged by the army is still being called up. Do they want to destroy him by instalment?"

Another mother, who wanted to remain anonymous, said her son had won a Rotary scholarship and had spent a year in Australia where he had met a "prominent person in exile".

After his return he went to university and was elected to the Students' Representative Council. At university he and his friends discussed the army "because they and their teachers are not allowed to do so at high school".

When faced with going to the army her son went into exile.

Recently she wrote to a friend: "He, like so many others, has gone - not to return until we have a peaceful future."



Avril Hoepner

Give our son's a choice — mums

A WEEK after thousands of conscripts began two years' army service, about 900 mothers throughout the country called on the government to provide an alternative to military service.

In Cape Town, Avril Hoepner, a mother of two sons, was one of about 55 mothers who supported the call.

"Without alternative service many young men were faced with an impossible dilemma," she said.

Over 100 Cape Town women signed a statement asking that conscripts be given a choice.

A service for all who support the statement will take place at the Rosebank Methodist Church on Thursday at 8 pm.

SOUTH. Feb. 9. pg. 2

The Daily News

FOUNDED IN 1878

Alternative service

FEW will disagree that South Africa needs the services of its young men for the defence of the country and the maintenance of law and order. Yet there is a growing minority group who, for political or religious reasons, are troubled by the present system of compulsory military service. A new group, Women Against War, is now circulating a petition calling for alternative, non-military forms of national service of the same duration as military service. The suggestion has merit.

Little purpose is served by

the lengthy imprisonment of conscientious objectors. They are not criminals; most are highly intelligent and often highly-qualified young men. A more flexible system could be created, one that might encompass perhaps a Peace Corps-style unit. It could be used to uplift neglected areas and communities and provide objectors with the opportunity to perform a meaningful service. Not only would it help eliminate a sensitive problem, it would also considerably enhance the image of the Defence Force.

'Give our sons a choice'

EIGHT hundred and forty eight white mothers from Johannesburg, Cape Town and Durban have called for changes to the laws concerning compulsory military service.

At meetings in the three major centres in the country this week, the women said last week's call-up had once again highlighted the moral dilemma of young men drafted into the SADF.

"Many young men wish to serve their country but question the role of the SADF," said the women in a statement.

"They ask whether the SADF in the townships and beyond our borders is defending the country they love or the system of apartheid, which they find indefensible.

"For others, the whole concept of bearing arms is abhorrent. "We share their anguish and stand in support of them. We call for constructive, non-punitive alternatives to obligatory military service."

The anguish experienced by the mothers was very apparent on the face of Judy Bester, whose 18 year old son Charles is presently serving a six-year prison sentence for refusing to serve in the SADF.

"Because I taught him that all men are equal in the eyes of God, he is seen in the eyes of the law as a criminal," said Bester.

"We now gaze at each other through a glass partition and talk through a tube. We are not allowed any contact.

"Who is responsible for his predicament? I, his mother, for inculcating the values that I did? His school, which encouraged independent thought? Or PW Botha who has made military service compulsory?"

"I was torn apart with concern on the one hand about what was happening to him and a sense of relief that he had not been forced into the townships as the others had," said Morton.

In a statement explaining why the women had taken a public stand, they said it was partly a "troubled response to the heavy jail terms meted out to objectors Ivan Toms, David Bruce and Charles Bester", and "came in the wake of last year's [stand] by 143 conscripts.

"For many (young men) there is little real option but to serve in the SADF.

"The choices are a six-year prison sentence, voluntary exile or the twilight world of avoidance. If they are religious objectors, they face a punishing six years of so-

called community service, often in meaningless jobs," said the mothers.

"Instead of our young men being embroiled in moral conflict, civil strife, fear and violence, we want them to have the choice of serving in other ways. Without this choice, South Africa loses their skills and contribution to a free, open and peaceful future for all."

The mothers' stand was supported by the Federation of Transvaal Women, who said it was encouraged by their "brave and open stand" and shared with them "a commitment to creating a peaceful society for the children of the future".

● A SOUTH African journalist who entered Mozambique illegally at the end of 1988 to avoid military service announced this week that he had applied for Mozambican citizenship.

Nelis Greyling, 21, who worked on the Afrikaans daily, Beeld, and has a degree from the Rand Afrikaans University, said he was opposed to both apartheid and capitalism and could not serve in the SADF.

He described the war in Angola as "both a war to protect apartheid and a war against socialism in Angola".

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A reminder to PW: You too refused to fight

By CHARLOTTE BAUER

THE mother of jailed conscientious objector Charles Bester at a press conference this week curtly reminded PW Botha that he had himself refused to fight for ideological reasons when South Africa declared war on Germany in 1939.

Judy Bester is one of hundreds of mothers around the country who have decided to follow their sons in protesting compulsory military service.

Saying she felt she was the one who had ultimately betrayed her son, currently serving a six-year prison sentence, Bester explained: "Because of his acceptance of my teaching, he refuses to espouse violent repression ... because I taught him that man is equal in the sight of God and therefore has a right to a say in his own destiny, he is seen by the state to be as great a threat to society as the most hardened of criminals ...

"Now, 20 times a year, for half an hour, I can gaze at him through a glass partition ..."

Urging the institution of "constructive, non-punitive alternatives to obligatory military service", the women, who announced their purpose at simultaneous press conferences in Johannesburg, Durban and Cape Town, are responding in part to the heavy prison terms meted out to objectors recently.

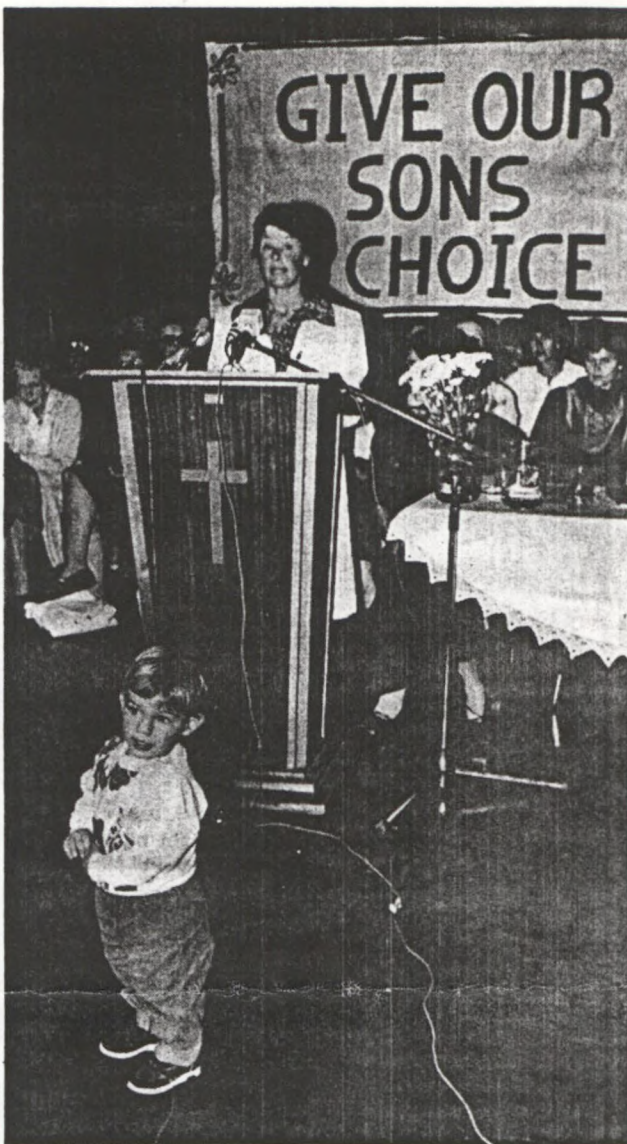
Stressing that they are not affiliated to any political grouping, the women said their statement was intended to "signal to our youth that we have not abandoned to them the entire question of war and peace in South Africa".

Under the banner "Give our sons a choice", they believe there should be other forms of national service which enable "young men to fulfil the values that they have learned in their homes, rather than deny these principles".

To this end, they believe, there should be:

- Service options which defuse racial polarisation and make a meaningful contribution towards building a common, non-racial society

- Options which will ensure that young people will contribute their talents for the communal good rather



Not old enough to worry about the call-up yet, what this toddler didn't know was that his and other mothers met in the hope that he never would. Gil de Vleg is the speaker

Picture: ANNA ZIEMINSKI, Afrapix

than abandon the country in which they were reared

- Options that ensure families are not torn apart by exile or jail.

Judy Bester pointed out that, despite PW Botha's decision not to fight in World War II against Germany, he still demanded the "blind obedience of today's young men to serve in his defence force.

"Now," she said, "military service is deemed a sacred national duty and

not to take part is said to be unmanly, cowardly and morally decadent."

In its statement the group suggested that "instead of our young men being embroiled in moral conflict, civil strife, fear and violence, we want them to have the choice of serving in other ways.

"Without this choice South Africa loses their skills and contribution to a free, open and peaceful future for all. We cannot afford this loss."

An iced cake leads a protest at war

By CARMEL RICKARD

IN Durban, Women Against War launched themselves with a tea party at which Millicent Toms, mother of Cape Town conscientious objector Ivan Toms, cut a massive cake iced with the words "Give them a choice".

This was a reference to the petition, signed by hundreds of women countrywide urging the government to give objectors "a meaningful choice" of alternative national service.

One of the women held up a colour photograph of her three-year-old son, saying she was bringing up her children to be peacemakers, not wagers of war.

A psychologist, who has counselled people involved in making decisions relating to the draft, said that training to kill, which formed part of military service, created or exacerbated personality problems in many people.

She said it was particularly traumatic for young men sitting next to black

colleagues in lectures at universities or technikons to contemplate aggression against them in the townships.

Another woman spoke of the painful separation from her brothers who had left the country to avoid military service. They would not have been eligible for religious objector status and were not prepared to spend "six wasted years in jail".

She said they were both "highly talented, skilled professionals who would dearly love to be sharing their skills with people in this country".

A representative of the group said they felt that in taking this stand they were also identifying with black women whose families were deeply affected by South Africa's continuing political conflict.

She said many white families were

placed in a dilemma by the present system, which gave people the option of two years' military service, six years' alternative service for those given strictly defined religious objector status, or six years in jail.

She and others described family break-ups caused by young men leaving the country in preference to serving in the army or going to jail.

Part of their petition reads: "These are terrible choices and we think there must be better alternatives. We call for an alternative to military service which would enable men to serve South Africa in constructive ways, such as true community service in religious and welfare organisations for the same length of time as national service."

WAW is holding a non-denominational service to pray for peace at St Mary's, Greyville, tomorrow from 2pm to 3pm.

Serving their country: mothers seek choice

Conscription has never been as easy as a matter of separating the men from the boys.

As long as the history of wars between people, as long as the list of perfectly masculine males who refused to serve under generals and commanders — not because they were afraid of the sound of bullets and not because they could not bear the thought of being killed, but because they could not identify with the cause the war stood for.

They were no lesser patriots than the men who decided to fight; they did not love their country less; they just believed in their right to make the decision to fight or not to fight.

Like P. W. Botha. He refused to be part of an army who declared war on Nazi Germany in 1939 for ideological reasons. He could not identify himself with the cause of the war, so he refused to fight.

Fifty years later pleas by a new voice in the conscription debate — that of the South African women — to give their loved ones the same choice, seem to fall on deaf ears.

"We are not against our sons serving their country," explains one concerned mother. "We just want them to have a choice in how they would like to serve."

She is one of a group of women in East London who have started a support group for conscripts, mothers of conscripts, wives of conscripts — "in fact anyone who is affected by the present conscript system in some way."

The group, formed earlier this year — when especially mothers of conscripts came out strongly for alternatives

to the present conscription system — wants to provide a platform for support and it will continue to investigate and suggest alternatives to the present two year compulsory system of military service.

"We want to create an awareness of the dilemma young men find themselves in when it is call-up time.



"A lot of boys grow up in a more 'open' environment these days where they are exposed to the aspirations of other race groups. Some start to question their role in protecting what they perceive as an unjust system. 'How can we go into the townships and fight our compatriots when what they are fighting for is the basic human right to be a full citizen of the country they were born in?,' they ask of us.

"We are mothers who feel the pain of our children and we want to do something to help them."

The reason for the pain becomes obvious when you look at the options someone has who does not want to go to the army.

A person can apply to the Board for Religious Objectors for religious objector status in one of three categories: A1 which is to serve as a non-combatant in SADF uniform without carrying a weapon for the normal two-year period; A2 which is to serve as a non-uniformed non-combatant in a maintenance capacity for one and a half times the normal call-up time; A3 which is to serve in alternative non-military service in a

government or municipal department for six continuous years.

There are other options among which are: he can go to jail for six years on a criminal charge or he can go into permanent exile.

None of these options are acceptable to many South African mothers who have demanded on a number of occasions this past year: Give our sons a choice.

The voice of women in the conscription issue is a new one. "Who would expect a mother to open her mouth about conscription," one of the East London mothers said. "Mothers have been ignored all these years on the assumption that they are satisfied with what is happening to their boys."

Apparently from groups and initiatives that are starting all over the country this was never the case. The harsh sentences passed on objectors Charles Bester, David Bruce and Ivan Toms just moved them from closet protesters into the open to stand up for what they believe is the inalienable right of their sons to make their own choices in life — which includes military conscription.

"There are many ways to serve the country. Our boys are not trying to duck service, but they cannot associate themselves with what the SADF claims they are fighting for or protecting," one of the women said.

"In almost every moment of every day, by thought and action, we weave around our sons a fabric of sound morality and ethics and acceptable social behaviour," Judy Bester, mother of

Charles said at a public meeting early this year.

"What if, when he is faced with the issue of military service in the controversial context of the current South African conflict, he decides that he could not take part?"

In the present system that makes him a criminal. Like Charles he faces six years in jail.

The result is, says one of the other mothers, that some of our best brains, but more important, some of our most sensitive characters, emigrate. They go into exile robbing South Africa of its greatest resource — human potential.

These mothers believe there is another way.

"There should be a choice between military service and genuine community service — service to meet basic human needs without which there can be no lasting peace or stability."

These services, the mothers say, can include going out into the community to build houses; assist welfare organisations; administer feeding schemes; run basic health programmes.

"Let them work hard. Let them do so for a period equal to military service but with the same recognition and breaks in their service," is the plea.

The East London support group's first priority is to reach and involve every woman affected by conscription in the area.

"We want to form a network of support. We want our sons to have a choice."



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BUSINESS

Futures traders chip in

Daily Dispatch Correspondent

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Daily Dispatch

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