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On-the-Record Briefing With Provincial Reconstruction Team (PRT) Leaders on Iraq

Via Digital Video Conference
Washington, DC
March 30, 2007

Counselor James Knight, Team Leader PRT Ninawa, Minister Counselor Steven Buckler, Team Leader PRT Salah ad Din, Counselor John Melvin Jones, Team Leader PRT Diyala, and Dr. Charles Hunter, Team Leader PRT Babil

MODERATOR IN DC: Okay, I think we're going to go ahead and begin at this point. So now that we've had the introductions underway, we can just go right into it. Go ahead.

QUESTION: Do we start?

MODERATOR IN DC: Yes.

QUESTION: Can I ask Mr. Buckler a question, please?

MR. BUCKLER: Please.

QUESTION: Yes. How are you doing to help in preventing the smuggling of oil to Syria and to the terrorists?

MR. BUCKLER: Now, there's a good question. We're spending a lot of time up at the Baiji refinery. There is -- as you've read in the *Wall Street Journal* recently, there's a great deal of interest and action on the part of the U.S. military there working with the refinery authorities. Now, I'm not very well suited to answer that question because I'm only going to go up and visit the refinery this coming April 4. That's going to be my first visit there.

So, at the moment, as regards the activities of the refinery and the disposition of the fuel products from it, I'm going to go learn more this coming Sunday, I think is the 4th, if I'm not mistaken.

QUESTION: Can I ask Mr. Knight -- I was asking Mr. Buckler first in Arabic about what happened in Talafar a few days ago, so what are you doing to avoid or to help avoid sectarianism and sectarian killing?

MR. KNIGHT: Well, there's several things about that incident I think you should be aware of. First of all, the bombing follows a pattern which has been going on now for the last several months. Talafar tends to be quiet for several weeks, then followed by, punctuated by, a large bombing. This fit that pattern.

As you know, violence in Ninawa is restricted largely to the cities of Mosul and Talafar. This particular incident was clearly intended to flame what I would be consider to be more ethnic than sectarian violence, and the good news side of that is that the leadership of the province, the leadership of the city, the security forces and the coalition forces, all converged immediately. The situation there is now quiet and I believe there's a general understanding that this was an effort by the insurgency to inflame ethnic tension, and I think it's failed.

QUESTION: There was -- I mean, somebody said that it was police officers who answered in Talafar and they were the ones who were killing people in their homes.

MR. KNIGHT: Ma'am, I'm a couple days out from the latest news about Talafar. My understanding was that was the initial perception. I also understand that many of the police that were initially accused of participating in that were, in fact, found not to have done so. I can't answer the question more specifically than that, but it does appear to have been an attempt to inflame ethnic violence that had obviously an effect; there were killings after the bombing. But it does appear that situation has been contained and that tensions are abating there.

We have many programs going in to Talafar. As you know, it's a focus city for us. In particular, we're trying to improve the quality of life there through sports programs, through development programs, to do something about the history of the place, as well as the more general kinds of reconstruction activities which are -- which we participate in as the PRT through oversight of the projects.

QUESTION: And I'm sorry I'm asking a lot of questions, but there is the major crime court. Are you planning to --

MR. KNIGHT: Yes, that's correct.

QUESTION: -- judge police officers if they are involved in the killings?

MR. KNIGHT: The major crimes court in Mosul would try people if they were connected -- if they were detained and charged with crimes that fall under the category of insurgent crimes. This particular case I don't know enough about it to answer the question. I can say that most of the individuals detained by the Iraqi police and charged, the process requires some time and is run through the Iraqi judicial system. Those individuals have been tried by the major crimes court in Mosul. These individuals, if they are, in fact, part of that process, will be tried by that court, yes.

QUESTION: Dr. Knight, could you explain what you mean when you say that it's more ethnic than sectarian. I know that --

MR. KNIGHT: I'm sorry, please continue.

QUESTION: I know the ethnicity there is quite complicated even compared to the rest of Iraq.

MR. KNIGHT: Well, Talafar is primarily a Turkomen city and most of them are Shia. The security forces that work in that area are predominantly not Turkomen so there is an ethnic side to tensions when it arises. It's the only significant concentration of Turkomen in the province of Ninawa.

QUESTION: And so what -- when you say that it was more ethnic than sectarian, what does that mean? It was against the --

MR. KNIGHT: The bombing occurred in the Turkomen Shia part of town, and the reaction to it that you've heard the most about was the reaction against the Shia in the north side of town.

QUESTION: Are the American soldiers still there?

MR. KNIGHT: American soldiers are there for supporting Iraqi forces. The primary lead for security in Talafar and elsewhere falls under the Iraqi security forces, including both the Iraqi police and Iraqi army.

QUESTION: Dr. Knight, what do you know about the aftermath of the Talafar bombing and do you have a sense of how many policemen were involved and -- in that?

MR. KNIGHT: I can't answer those questions. That's actually more appropriately directed at the -- to the individuals in (inaudible). I've been down in Baghdad for two days. I have not followed the most recent information.

QUESTION: This is a question to everybody. Can you give us some examples how the Iraqis are appreciating the fruits of your efforts to them?

MR. KNIGHT: Well, you've heard about the (inaudible), the major crimes court. This is probably our greatest recent success. It's resolved, to a great extent, the problem of intimidation of judges which was blocking the pursuit of insurgent trials. We've successfully seen that a process for capital improvement projects both -- are funded both by Iraqi firms and by those provided in the coalition. They are held to a consensual process involving the provincial council's reconstruction committee as well as the Provincial Reconstruction and Development Committee, which deals especially with the coalition funds. We have business programs that are making a difference. We have the Ninawa Business Center which has been a very effective micro-loan program. It has created several hundred jobs in the city of Mosul, hoping to expand the same kind of program to Talafar at the small business center there.

We are also focusing on ways in which international investors can participate in some -- industrial base in Ninawa. And the other side of the rule of law piece is that we are providing significant training in an enhanced crime lab for the Iraqi police in Ninawa. That's a very quick outline of the major things that we've accomplished. I think all of these contribute to a better environment in the province of Ninawa.

Again, going back to the major crimes court, the governor believes that we have reduced the number of security incidents by half since the court has been set up, which has been a period of three months. This is a significant change in quite a short time and I'm quite proud of that.

MR. BUCKLER: On the Major Crimes Court in Salah ad Din province, we're still in the process of trying to construct a building in which the court activities can take place. We recently sponsored a conference of judges, prosecutors and those involved in judicial system in Salah ad Din. To hear back from our rule of law expert, it was really quite astonishing because it's the first time that apparently all of those who are -- who have to coordinate their activities for the rule of law had really sat down and had the opportunities to discuss procedures and court activities together, so he was very pleased with that. It carries forward with what we're trying to do in many cases and that is, bring Iraqi parties together to communicate, to coordinate. This is something that I certainly, during my coming year in Iraq, hope to enhance a great deal, is enabling Iraqis to come together. We want to facilitate that.

I hope this doesn't sound mundane, because it really is of extraordinary satisfaction and importance to us, but this last week, the provincial council approved its capital budget for the year 2007. This kind of proceeding, an elected body, certainly in the United States, we take largely for granted, but at the conclusion of this, our civil affairs officer was absolutely delighted to see how pleased the provincial council was to have done this, to sit down, negotiate, allocate in a fair manner \$100 million for the capital budget to province for the coming year was a first-time thing and they were tremendously pleased and so are we. Our next step now is to work with them on spending it wisely.

MR. JONES: In Diyala province, we are a little more basic. We have had a great success with the opening of our radio and television station. In a province, as you know, that has been experiencing a great deal of violence recently, this is a major step in the direction of getting the warring parties to at least sit down and listen to radio stations that broadcast a message of reconciliation. We have five young people who have spent their time at the station, of course guarded by U. S. troops, but they've been able to put together a program that's on the air 23 hours per day and their message is both to the Sunni and the Shia community, and they speak of reconciliation.

This is a major break for us because it, I think for the first time in Diyala province, gets the message out that there is hope for the province.

On a more basic note, we have had success in terms of getting money, for example, from the central bank here in Baghdad up to Baquba so that salaries could be paid to public servants. We've already set in place a process by which we can get fuel oil into the province. And we are working now on a procedure whereby we can get food into the province. So this is an attempt by the PRT and our support brigade to assist the people of Diyala province in spite of all the violence that's going on up there right now.

DR. HUNTER: In Babil we're active in many of the areas you've already heard cited. I've spoken the Arabic remarks about things that we've done in rule of law and to support the provincial council. We're also a largely agricultural province and so there at sometimes a very basic level the team has been active in carrying out projects that both have an immediate impact on people and help build capacity for the future, things like cleaning canals, for instance. It doesn't sound very exciting, but it's really vital for agriculture to be able to flourish there. And the work that we've done this year -- this past year, I should say, 2006 -- has prompted the provincial council to set aside substantially more funds than we had spent to continue those activities for the future, things like providing sheep dip tanks. Again, not very exciting, nor are seed cleaners, but those sorts of things make a real concrete difference in people's lives.

There are quite a few examples of those things. And to be honest, another thing that we're focusing on more and more is simply trying to raise awareness of the partnership that's out there. The simple name of our enterprise has created a lot

of expectations, some of it misplaced, about what we're going to be able to do in working here in Iraq because we no longer have the budgets to carry out huge reconstruction projects.

Instead, it's more about building people's capacity, trying to provide skills that can be used far into the future. And so part of our work now is to try to get that message out to people and to do it as much as possible, also through our Iraqi partners in the provincial council, in the government's office, to be educating people about what this partnership is and to manage expectations thereby.

So whether it's me or other people on my team starting to talk with local media to get this message out, that too is an important thing that may not be very tangible or very exciting from the U.S. perspective but I think is making a concrete difference in how the situation is viewed in building appreciation for the partnership that is there. And there is a very substantial partnership. Another way in which that's been critical for us in Babil province is the PRTs work in supporting security forces there. Babil, fortunately, has been a very comparatively secure place and that has in part been because of the strong links that the PRT developed with the security leadership, which in some cases has met making sure that the political leadership in the province fully appreciates what an asset it's got and the importance of protecting it.

QUESTION: Gentlemen are you involved in any way in the process of resettling Iraqi refugees?

MR. KNIGHT: I'm sorry, I didn't understand the question.

QUESTION: Are you involved in any way in the process of resettling or assessing the applications for Iraqi refugees?

MR. KNIGHT: No, we are not.

MR. BUCKLER: Not within Iraq, no.

QUESTION: Could I ask Mr. Jones, to what do you attribute the recent increase, severe increase, in violence in Diyala, if you could tell us with as much detail as possible.

MR. JONES: Well, I think there are a number of factors. I think the key factor right now is the push in Baghdad itself which has resulted in many of the insurgents moving north. As you know, we are about 50 miles northeast of Baghdad. There are major highways coming into the area. I believe that the hard push in Baghdad itself has resulted in a lot of the insurgents moving into the area. It's also an area that's accessible both by highway and by air from some of the other areas in the country. We're close the border with Iran. There are major highways going north and south. So the area itself is very fertile. It's considered the breadbasket of Iraq.

The Diyala River Valley I think has attracted a lot of insurgents. So I think they are looking at it from the perspective that in the past because it was a Sunni-dominated province in the last election, as you know, the Shia won most of the important seats, and I think that it probably was seen as a very fertile area for a lot of the Sunni insurgents to enter to play on the fears of the Sunni residents there as a way of trying to push the Shia out. But there are a number of factors and I would really hate to try to pinpoint one. I think the key is right now the large number of insurgents moving into the area from the south.

QUESTION: Is there enough -- is there an increase in -- I know this isn't your area, but is there an increase in security forces to try and deal with this shift?

MR. JONES: Again, that's a little out of my area of expertise, but from where we are now at forward operating base Warhorse, yes, there has been an increase in our troop strength there.

QUESTION: And how much of an increase?

MODERATOR IN BAGHDAD: Let me just step in here. Obviously, I should have had a talk with all of you about the ground rules before we started, but please try to confine your questions to the activities of the PRT. And if you want to talk more about security issues or issues with the military, you know very well that those could be directed to the Pentagon. Thank you.

MODERATOR IN DC: And actually, at this point, this is the last question for Mr. Jones because he's going to do some radio engagements afterwards, so if I could just ask that you finish.

QUESTION: Mr. Jones, in the PRT's work liaisons with the police department, there's been concern about the police chief Hasan (ph) who is in Diyala. How has working with him been? Is he still in place? There were movements to get him out of Diyala. What's the latest on that?

MR. JONES: Our latest information is that he is currently in place. He works with us rather closely. The brigade commander entertains him from the perspective of keeping him in the loop in terms of the activities that the brigade is engaged in. His officers have been very helpful in providing the kind of security that we need in order to move around in the province. So my estimation is that he is there, he's done a good job and he's very cooperative with the American forces.

MODERATOR IN DC: Okay, thank you. Mr. Jones, if I can kindly ask that we begin the radio engagement.

MS. STEVENS: Just for ten minutes. Just for ten minutes, then you'll come back.

QUESTION: Mr. Hunter, could you discuss your overall situation down in Hilla, how easy or difficult it is to work there and how quiet it is or not?

DR. HUNTER: Would you mind repeating the question? We're getting some buzz on the line?

TECH STAFF: This is the (inaudible) administrator. If someone has their cell phone -- we're getting some interference and it's probably from cell phone interference. Could you all please turn your cell phones off? There that's much better. Thank you.

QUESTION: Yes, Mr. Hunter, if you could just describe the overall situation in the Hilla area, how difficult it is for you to work there, whether you need a lot of security or not? What's the overall situation?

DR. HUNTER: Sure. Well, Hilla is the capital of Babil province, of course, which is a mixed province. The Sunnis are concentrated in the north and as you're also aware will be getting an embedded PRT in north Babil soon which will be interacting primarily with that region. As for Hilla itself, we get out quite regularly into the city to meet with the governor of the provincial council, other officials, and they come and see us. The facility where we're located has been an American presence since 2003 and so it's a place where people are used to coming to talk with the Americans. And I find that we're able to operate by and large the way that I'd like to. When we go out it's with a robust security package, but we're able to get out essentially when we need to to interact with people and that makes it, let's say, more possible to do business than some of our colleagues who are remote from the provinces that they cover.

QUESTION: And what is the Iraqi political make up in the province and in the city?

DR. HUNTER: Well, the provincial council, which is composed of 41 members, currently has no Shia -- excuse me, no Sunni -- member of it. The Sunni there boycotted the elections in 2005. The Supreme Council for the Islamic Revolution in Iraq, SCIRI, dominates that council and most of the other provincial-level positions, the mayorships and so on. There are smatterings of other groupings. The Prime Minister's party, the Dawa Party, has representation also and the deputy council chair is from the Dawa Party. There are a few people affiliated with the (inaudible) trend on the provincial council and a handful of others (inaudible) several -- two communist party members in the provincial council, though, communist of an unusual sort who speak the language of free trade more than of state-controlled economy. So it's a diverse mix down there. And I'm sure there are others who perhaps might want to get into the game who haven't yet.

QUESTION: (Inaudible) the presence there at all?

DR. HUNTER: Pardon me?

QUESTION: Is there any Jaish al-Mahdi presence at all?

DR. HUNTER: Oh, yeah. I confined my remarks just to the political level as opposed to militias which I was putting more into a security category. But yes, absolutely Jaish al-Mahdi is present down there, so are other militias and the security situation is something that both the police and army keep a very close watch on. Babil is blessed with extremely professional security forces, including a rapid reaction force, the Hilla SWAT or the Scorpion force, that is a resource that the prime minister has used in other neighboring provinces as well. And they are very much engaged in trying to assure security for the ordinary citizens there. There's been a bit of a flare up over the last couple of weeks in violence from Jaish al-Mahdi that the Scorpion forces are confronting and doing their best to tamp down.

QUESTION: Would that also be a result of Mahdi Army people fleeing Baghdad? Have you seen an increase?

DR. HUNTER: I don't have -- let's say, concrete, specific information but it stands to reason that with Operation (inaudible) that's going on right now that individuals are leaving to other provinces to include Babil. And so it's not out of the realm of possibility that there could be such a link, but I don't want to draw a solid line to say absolutely yes; that is the cause.

QUESTION: Do you have other thoughts on what the cause might be?

DR. HUNTER: Pardon me?

QUESTION: Do you have other thoughts on what the cause of the recent flare ups in the past few weeks might be?

DR. HUNTER: Just as an example, and again I'm not going to say that this is the definitive answer, but there are -- there's a certain degree of, let's say, Shia-on-Shia tension there. As I said, there are a number of different militias and political factions present. All of them, I'm sure, are looking to secure their advantage on the ground and they'll pursue that by the means that they see fit.

QUESTION: Sorry, can you define the Shia and Shia? Who are they?

DR. HUNTER: Well, you'd probably need a political scientist to do that and I am not a political scientist, so I'd honestly, you know, prefer not to get terribly far into that. We've named some of the major groups: Jaish al-Mahdi obviously, the brother organization that is affiliated with SCIRI. You know, you saw the news reports on this organization, Jund al-Samaa, the Soldiers of Heaven, over the past couple of months, not clear yet to what degree they are still around. That's just a very short and not comprehensive list.

QUESTION: And the Iraqi police is not involved?

DR. HUNTER: The Iraqi police, I believe, in Babil province is involved in trying to assure law and order, led by the provincial police chief Qais Maamouri, who has survived a number of assassination attacks and I think proves himself day in and day out a loyal patriot whose one concern is that law and order be applied without regard to any type of religious, ethnic, sectarian affiliation.

QUESTION: Are you guys seeing any splintering of the Jaish al-Mahdi over there? There were concerns about splintering factions and I was just wondering if that -- if you think that could be part of the reason for some of the flare ups in the past couple of weeks?

DR. HUNTER: Again, it's possible. I wish I could tell you that I sit down every day with people from the Sadrists and get the latest information, dump on what they're thinking and planning. (Laughter.) But I'm afraid that's not the way it goes, so there's a certain amount of guesswork involved in this. But you, like everyone else, I'm sure have been seeing reports for a period of many months suggesting that there is not a monolithic Jaish al-Mahdi and I think that's a pretty good portrayal of how things are on the ground.

QUESTION: I wonder if you could each describe the status of the major reconstruction projects in your areas even if that's not your current focus? How many of them are up and running? How many of them are still awaiting completion?

MR. KNIGHT: I'm not sure that's a fair question. There have been projects going in now for four years and the ones that were funded and have been completed are the vast majority of that. There is a significant fuel problem and electricity problem in Ninawa which is blocking those -- many of the ones that have been more recently completed from being fully effective.

As the PRT, we don't reconstruct anything. What we do is facilitate the process of allocation contracting and follow-up. But I can say that process is working quite well. The money flowing from the Government of Iraq now dwarfs anything coming through the coalition forces. The coalition funding is less than 10 percent of what goes in. The process worked quite well last year. It's something that we will expect it to work equally well this year. But again, the issue in Ninawa right now is getting the economy moving. Economic recovery has now slowed enormously by the energy problems we have there.

QUESTION: Did you say -- I'm sorry, did you say there was a fuel problem? I didn't quite hear you?

MR. KNIGHT: That's correct. Yes, there is a significant fuel and electricity shortage in Ninawa province. That's true nationwide. I can only speak for my province, but it's becoming a significant economic problem.

MODERATOR IN DC: Charlie, did you want to ask something? We're going to have to wrap this up pretty quickly.

QUESTION: Yes. Chuck, earlier you made reference to your ability to get out and sometimes for people you want to see to come in. Can you talk with any more specificity about how often you want to go out but for security reasons can't and have to bring people in?

And also, any of the others who are there, the same question. How often would you like to go out and see people but are not able to for security reasons or because the military doesn't want to take you out?

DR. HUNTER: Okay. In our case, it's not the military. We're on a State Department facility and it's Blackwater that we travel with. The number of times that I've had trips canceled is pretty small. I'd say I can count on the fingers of one hand the number that I haven't been able to go on in a six-month period. But I want to make clear that I don't view it as a tradeoff between going out to see people and having people come see us, and that's based strictly on location. We're right there in Hila. And whether I go to someone's office or someone comes to see me, the important thing is that there is face-to-face communication and dialogue going on, and that happens every single day.

QUESTION: Any of the others?

MR. BUCKLER: Yeah, in the Tikrit area in Salah ad Din, I would say we're extremely lucky. In the short time that I've been there, nothing has impeded -- no security-related issues have really impeded the travel in and out of town. And I was saying to somebody a few minutes ago that I've worked in embassies for several decades now and I have never seen an embassy as actively engaged on a daily basis in a personal way as I have our office in Tikrit. The military unit that helps us with security is very, very responsive. They have really taken onboard their role in ensuring that we can travel in and out of the city, so we've been very lucky.

That's doubly fortunate because the nature of the work we're doing with Iraqi officials is not something you conduct over the phone even if they work. We are working very hard to convince them to basically change their relationships with one another and the way in which they work; to wit, conduct their affairs transparently. And this is just not something that works over a telephone, so I am very, very pleased with how active we can be.

Now, on the other hand, the security requirements are extremely inconvenient. It does cause us to have to plan considerably in advance. There's no spontaneity whatsoever in our trips downtown. It's hot, it's dirty. We are always

keenly aware that we're putting the young soldiers at risk who are operating the convoys that transport us in and out of the city, but it works. I'm very pleased with it. We're one of the best PRTs in that regard from being able to conduct our work that way.

MR. KNIGHT: In Ninawa we also are supported by our military movement teams. It's extremely unusual to have one of those movements cancelled by security concerns. It hasn't happened more than three times in the last 90 days. We are a little more fortunate, I gather, because we are, in fact, able to make short fuse moves when it's necessary. We try to avoid that because there is a particular planning involved, but we're very fortunate; we're able to go on to almost anywhere we want to when we need to.

QUESTION: Can I ask a question for everyone? Secretary Knight was testifying -- or Secretary Rice, I'm sorry --

MODERATOR IN DC: That's a heck of a promotion.

QUESTION: Yeah, sorry about that -- was on Capitol Hill and talking about the staffing of the PRTs and saying that they thought reservists would have to -- you know, would need to fill a good number of those positions within the PRTs. That's a concern, a bit of a concern over at the Pentagon. But I just wanted to get your thoughts on it and just -- in terms of staffing, how you guys are doing, what your thoughts are on more reservists, could you use more State Department folks?

MR. KNIGHT: Well, in Ninawa, we are not going to be part of the surge, so the people you're talking about don't affect us. We're the second-largest PRT after Baghdad. About half our operational staff are, in fact, military civil affairs folks. They do an extremely good job for us. But USAID is ramping up its programs. The Ninawa PRT is the only one, I think, that's mature enough to seriously consider becoming a USAID-focused operation over the next year. And if that's the case, I think that this particular issue will not be critical for us. We do expect some additional staffing later on in the surge. Later on this summer, we'll be able to put those people to work. But I think our real future lies in USAID-led programming and we're moving quickly in that direction.

MODERATOR IN DC: Okay.

MR. JONES: We're -- oh, go ahead.

MODERATOR IN DC: Go ahead.

MR. JONES: No, go ahead.

MODERATOR IN DC: No, no, sorry --

MR. JONES: On the -- go ahead and pose your question.

MODERATOR IN DC: No, we were just going to wrap it up, but I didn't realize you were about to speak, so please now go ahead and answer the question. I'm sorry.

MR. BUCKLER: Oh, okay. In Salah ad Din, we're quite dependent on the military reservists and I think we're, mid-summer, expecting more. They are, as far as I'm concerned, simply extraordinary in their enthusiasm and skills. As the Department is able to hire as according to plan, those with civil affairs skills, that will be a good substitute. But for now, we are dependent on the military reservists. Our small victory with the provincial council that I was reciting, that I was telling earlier was exclusively the efforts of a couple of our reserve officers, one of whom is a lawyer in the Baltimore area, a former elected official, and he had such credibility with the provincial council, based on his own experience in the United States, that the chemistry was there, his training was there, his enthusiasm for the job, and the reserve system has just been able to provide, I think, fantastic people.

DR. HUNTER: As for us, the Babil team has been fairly fully staffed, almost to the level of James' team as well. We're expecting more people over the course of the year, in stages we trust, because we won't be able to fit them all at once otherwise. But here, we're got some fairly specific skill sets in mind and ultimately, what's going to be important, as Steve just mentioned, is making sure that we've got the right fit for those positions, because in this particular context, that personal relationship is key for making sure that things can happen. We've been very fortunate in the rule of law representative that we've had with our agriculture person, people with a great deal of enthusiasm, vision, and commitment to this enterprise. And that's something that our Iraqi counterparts see and respond to. So I'm hoping that we'll continue to see people coming our way who have all of those qualities in abundance.

MODERATOR IN DC: All right. Well, thank you very much for taking the time.

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