II. Armed conflict and peace processes in the Sahel and Lake Chad region

IAN DAVIS

For the purpose of this section the Sahel and Lake Chad region comprises 12 countries: Burkina Faso, Cameroon, Chad, Côte d’Ivoire, Gambia, Ghana, Guinea, Mali, Mauritania, Niger, Nigeria and Senegal. At least half of them (Burkina Faso, Cameroon, Chad, Mali, Niger and Nigeria) were involved in armed conflicts in 2019, all of which worsened in terms of conflict-related fatalities (compared with 2018).

The region faces acute security challenges linked to weakness of the states, corruption and non-inclusive governance, which have added to or exacerbated a range of existing problems, including extreme poverty, economic fragility and low resilience. This economic fragility (Niger is at the bottom of the United Nations Development Programme 2019 human development index, while Burkina Faso, Chad and Mali are near the bottom) and the impact of climate change in a region where more than 80 per cent of the population relies essentially on agriculture and pastoral activities have led to increased food insecurity and heightened intercommunal conflict.\(^1\) The conflict dynamics also include irregular migration, illicit trafficking and transnational organized crime, especially where there are weak governmental institutions. The rising violence has also led to schools being targeted by armed groups and increasing numbers of school closures in the region. Between April 2017 and June 2019 for example, the three countries of the central Sahel (Burkina Faso, Mali and Niger) witnessed a sixfold increase in school closures due to violence, from 512 to 3005.\(^2\)

These security challenges have been increasingly linked to the rise of violent extremism and the proliferation of armed non-state groups, with some important differences between the Sahel and Lake Chad regions. In the latter for example, the main insurgent group, Boko Haram, has spread from Nigeria (see below) across the Lake Chad region, causing a massive humanitarian crisis and increasing internal and cross-border displacement of people.\(^3\) Prior to 2019 the other three main violent extremist groups—Group to Support Islam and Muslims (Jama’a Nusrat ul-Islam wa al-Muslimin, \(\text{JNIM}\), Ansarul Islam and Islamic State in the Greater Sahara (ISGS) (see box 7.1)—were mostly confined to the Sahel: Mali, northern Burkina Faso and western Niger, respectively. However, in 2019 following the deterioration in

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the security situation in Burkina Faso (see below), there was a heightened risk that they might spread to coastal West African states, such as Benin, Ghana and Togo. Some of the jihadist groups have been adept at exploiting the grievances of marginalized communities and intercommunal tensions to recruit members. According to one study for example, ‘Lack of economic

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opportunities, a sense of diminished social status, and the need for protection against cattle theft’ were factors that apparently influenced the decision of local people to join ISGS.5

To combat these groups and to prevent them spreading to more countries in the region and beyond, several multilateral peace and counterterrorism operations have been established (see table 7.1).

**Burkina Faso**

Ansarul Islam has been waging a low-level insurgency in Burkina Faso since 2016, but in 2019 the country became the focal point of the Sahel jihadi crisis, with JNIM and to a lesser extent ISGS significantly expanding their operations in the country.\(^6\) Armed conflict fatalities increased significantly in Burkina Faso in 2019 (see table 7.2). However, attributing responsibility for the armed violence is complex due to several interconnected layers of conflict, including: (a) the government’s conflict with the heavily armed jihadists, mainly along the northern border with Mali—a spillover from the Mali crisis and retaliation for Burkina Faso’s participation in the UN Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission in Mali (MINUSMA)—and in the east towards the border with Niger, (b) increasing clashes between local self-defence groups (ethnic and village militias) and jihadist groups and (c) other sources of violence, such as banditry, farmer–herder competition and land disputes.

After 27 years of uninterrupted, semi-authoritarian rule, public protests in 2014 resulted in the country’s first ever civilian-led political transition, including peaceful elections in 2015. However, the government’s failure to curb the violence forced the resignation of Prime Minister Paul Kaba Thieba and his entire cabinet in January 2019. The successor government is led by Christophe Dabiré.\(^7\)

As the violence spread to the Boucle du Mouhoun, Centre-Nord, Est and Nord regions, the Islamist extremist groups were able to exploit divisions among the numerous ethnic groups in Burkina Faso. ISGS and JNIM have

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\(^6\) ‘Burkina Faso and jihadism in West Africa’, *Strategic Comments*, vol. 25, no. 6 (2019), pp. viii–x.


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**Table 7.2. Estimated conflict-related fatalities in Burkina Faso, 2013–19**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
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</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Battles</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>36</td>
<td>40</td>
<td>95</td>
<td>782</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Explosions/remote violence</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>32</td>
<td>109</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Protests, riots and strategic developments</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Violence against civilians</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>38</td>
<td>66</td>
<td>173</td>
<td>1295</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td><strong>8</strong></td>
<td><strong>36</strong></td>
<td><strong>23</strong></td>
<td><strong>81</strong></td>
<td><strong>116</strong></td>
<td><strong>303</strong></td>
<td><strong>2198</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Note:* For definitions of event types, see Armed Conflict Location & Event Data Project (ACLED), ‘ACLED definitions of political violence and protest’, 11 Apr. 2019.

*Source:* ACLED, ‘Data export tool’, [n.d.].
recruited broadly among the Fulani community, for example. In addition, as has been the case in Mali, self-defence groups and vigilantes have become increasingly involved in counter-militancy efforts, triggering intercommunal violence among jihadi groups and the self-defence groups and militias.

Security continued to deteriorate throughout the year as suspected jihadists increased attacks on civilians and security forces, especially in the north and east. In May for example, six people were killed in an attack on a church in the country’s north, following months of rising violence targeting schools and public services. In November at least 37 people were killed in an attack on a Canadian mining company’s convoy in the east, where the identity of the combatants was unknown, as has increasingly been the case in many of the attacks.

The violence has triggered a sudden humanitarian crisis in the country, with about half a million people (out of a population of 20 million) being internally displaced, lacking healthcare and experiencing food insecurity. Around 1.5 million people in Burkina Faso needed humanitarian aid—protection, food and livelihoods assistance—in 2019, and this is expected to rise to 2.2 million in 2020.

Table 7.3. Estimated conflict-related fatalities in Cameroon, 2013–19

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
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</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Battles</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>1,223</td>
<td>959</td>
<td>340</td>
<td>269</td>
<td>983</td>
<td>640</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Explosions/remote violence</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>33</td>
<td>202</td>
<td>175</td>
<td>217</td>
<td>31</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Protests, riots and strategic developments</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>46</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Violence against civilians</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>110</td>
<td>278</td>
<td>195</td>
<td>183</td>
<td>492</td>
<td>543</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td>32</td>
<td>1,366</td>
<td>1,439</td>
<td>721</td>
<td>715</td>
<td>1,513</td>
<td>1,205</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: For definitions of event types, see Armed Conflict Location & Event Data Project (ACLED), ‘ACLED definitions of political violence and protest’, 11 Apr. 2019.

Source: ACLED, ‘Data export tool’, [n.d.].

Cameroon

There were two main unrelated armed conflicts in Cameroon in 2019: the anglophone crisis in the west and the Boko Haram insurgency in the north. In June for example, 16 soldiers and 8 civilians were killed in a Boko Haram attack, the deadliest attack against security forces since 2016. However, the highest levels of violence took place in the west as government forces continued efforts to defeat the anglophone separatist insurgency. Conflict-related fatalities in 2019 were at a slightly lower level than in 2018, although violence against civilians increased to the highest levels in the 2013–19 period (see table 7.3).

The conflict in anglophone Cameroon

The origins of the anglophone crisis began almost a century ago. Between 1922 and 1960 France administered most of Cameroon, but the North-west and South-west regions were ruled as a British protectorate. Today, 5 million people in those two regions—about one fifth of the country’s population—speak mainly English and have their own legal and educational systems. Long-standing tensions in this part of the country—the anglophone demand for an autonomous republic called Ambazonia, because of a sense of marginalization by the French-speaking majority, dates back to at least 1985—turned violent in October 2017. The confrontation, which started as protests by anglophone teachers and lawyers against the use of French in anglophone schools and courts, was transformed into an armed insurgency by separatist militias after the protests were harshly repressed by the government.

In 2019 violence continued in the anglophone regions, and more than 486,000 people were displaced, with about 105,000 fleeing to Nigeria. The conflict has turned into a significant and complex humanitarian emergency, with about 2.3 million people in need at the end of 2019, an increase of 80 per cent compared with the beginning of 2019 and an almost 15-fold increase since 2018. Attacks on medical staff and infrastructure became a frequent occurrence, and more than 80 per cent of government-run health facilities were closed in the two anglophone regions. In addition, almost 90 per cent of children in the two regions have not gone to school for three years,

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16 OCHA (note 13), p. 52.
17 OCHA (note 13), p. 52.
because of forced displacements and the enforcement of a boycott called for by separatists.\textsuperscript{18}

Human rights abuses and violations continued to be reported during 2019, including torture, arbitrary arrest, detention and forced disappearances. Many of the attacks were attributed to government forces, and especially members of the Rapid Intervention Battalion.\textsuperscript{19} Increasing violence and the lack of progress towards political solutions to the crisis suggests that further displacement and increased humanitarian needs will continue in 2020.

In 2018 it was hoped that a proposed anglophone general conference organized by religious leaders would be a first step towards a national dialogue and mediation process. However, the conference was postponed twice during that year, with no clear indication as to when the government might permit it to proceed.\textsuperscript{20} On 10 September 2019 President Paul Biya proposed a national dialogue aimed at resolving the crisis, but it was reportedly unlikely to include separatists or other important English-speaking constituencies.\textsuperscript{21} The national dialogue event took place from 30 September to 4 October in the capital Yaoundé. Opinion was divided as to whether it offered grounds for optimism or was a facade. Although several separatist leaders pulled out, calling instead for international mediation, a series of concessions and proposals emerged from the dialogue, including a special status for anglophone regions and more regional autonomy. President Biya also released more than 300 separatist fighters and opposition leader Maurice Kamto.\textsuperscript{22} However, it seemed unlikely that the concessions would be sufficient to satisfy separatist groups and end the fighting.

\section*{Chad}

Chad has been an important partner for the international community in the fight against jihadist groups in the Sahel.\textsuperscript{23} In 2019 the security situation continued to deteriorate in the country, with a sharp increase in attacks by

\textsuperscript{18} \textit{The Economist}, ‘A war of words: English-speaking villages are burning in Cameroon’, 7 Nov. 2019; and Maclean, R., ‘Stay home or risk being shot: Cameroon’s back-to-school crisis’, \textit{The Guardian}, 3 Sep. 2019.


Boko Haram, other Chadian armed groups and intercommunal violence—particularly between Arab and non-Arab communities in eastern Chad.\footnote{International Crisis Group, *Avoiding the Resurgence of Inter-communal Violence in Eastern Chad*, Africa Report no. 284 (International Crisis Group: Brussels, 30 Dec. 2019).} These conflicts flowed partly from farmer–herder competition, but also from deeper identity-based rivalries over land and political power. There were over 560 conflict-related fatalities in 2019 (and 450 were combat related), which is the highest level since 2015 (when there were nearly 430 conflict-related deaths).\footnote{ACLED, ‘Data export tool’, [n.d.].} In early February Chadian rebels based in southern Libya launched an incursion into north-east Chad. At the government’s request, French air strikes halted their advance—the first direct French military intervention in Chad since 2008.\footnote{International Crisis Group, ‘Rebel incursion exposes Chad’s weaknesses’, Q&A, 13 Feb. 2019; and Corey-Boulet, R., ‘Threatened by rebels, Chad’s Deby leans on firepower from France’, *World Politics Review*, 8 Feb. 2019.} Incidents involving Boko Haram in 2019 included an assault by the group on a Chadian military position in the south-west in March that killed 23 soldiers, and an attack on a Lake Chad fishing village in the country’s western region in December that killed over 14 people.\footnote{Reuters, ‘Boko Haram militants kill 23 Chad soldiers: Security sources’, 22 Mar. 2019; and New Arab, ‘Boko Haram launches deadly attack on Chad fishing village’, 19 Dec. 2019.} In August after dozens of people were killed in communal violence in eastern Chad, the government imposed a six-month state of emergency.\footnote{France 24, ‘Chad declares emergency in east after dozens die in ethnic violence’, 18 Aug. 2019.}

More than 50,000 people were displaced by the deteriorating security environment in 2019, bringing the number of internally displaced in Chad to over 175,000. In addition, the country hosted 468,000 refugees from the Central African Republic, Nigeria and Sudan. Legislative elections, originally scheduled for 2015, continued to be postponed, and the country faced many economic challenges, including declining oil revenues and the closure of borders. Food insecurity affected nearly 3.8 million people.\footnote{OCHA (note 13), p. 54.}

**Mali**

Since 2015 Mali’s central regions of Mopti and Ségou have become the focus of interconnected challenges of governance, development and security. Security in central Mali continued to deteriorate in 2019, whereas the situation in the north (Gao, Kidal, Ménaka, Taoudénit and Timbuktu) generally remained...
stable. However, the security situation remained complex throughout the country.30

The situation in northern Mali

The instability in the north has its roots in a long-running Tuareg rebellion and, in 2012, an opportunistic alliance of Tuareg separatists and Islamist militants that seized control of northern cities. International intervention and a 2015 peace accord helped to quell, but not end, the armed conflict in the north, which is now multidimensional and includes three coalitions of armed groups that signed the 2015 peace accord or were included in the subsequent process—Coordination of Azawad Movements, Coordination of Entente Movements and Platform of Movements of 14 June 2014 of Algiers—a network of jihadist groups (mainly JNIM) and various self-defence groups.31 According to a UN expert panel on Mali, the connections among the various armed groups ‘are mainly opportunistic, either motivated by the local political dynamics and balance of power or by criminal interests’.32 The UN reported in December 2019 that ‘the security situation in the north has deteriorated and become increasingly more complex’, and highlighted ‘increased terrorist activity’ in the Ménaka region.33


The situation in central Mali

Since 2015 the centre has experienced a growing rise in social unrest, banditry and intercommunal violence—among the Fulani, Bambara and Dogon ethnic groups in the Mopti and Ségou regions. The dynamics of the conflict in this region are multidimensional, often rooted in conflicts over land use and natural resources. The jihadist groups have been adept at mobilizing support by exploiting local grievances and social fractures. Their spread into the centre and the government's increasing reliance on some ethnically based self-defence groups to fight them has led to increased retributive violence. On 23 March 2019 for example, a Dogon militia attacked the village of Ogossagou and killed at least 157 Fulani civilians, while on 9 and 17 June armed attacks on Dogon-inhabited villages killed almost an equal number of civilians.

Some of the counterterrorism operations of the Malian security and defences forces, which are supported by French forces (Operation Barkhane) and the Joint Force of the Group of Five for the Sahel (JF-GSS), appear to have exacerbated the intercommunal violence. Human rights abuses have been widespread and armed groups and local militias have proliferated, while root causes (such as the lack of public services and a weak governance) remain unaddressed.

The humanitarian impact

In all the regions of Mali affected by armed conflict in 2019, essential services, including schools and health centres, were interrupted or halted. Conflict-related fatalities, including violence against civilians continued to rise in 2019, as shown in table 7.4. There were also heavy casualties in the armed conflict between government and international forces and jihadist groups. In November 2019 for example, ISGS militants killed 53 Malian soldiers and one civilian in an attack on an army base near the Mali–Niger border.

The growing insecurity has also led to a large rise in internally displaced people—from 77 000 in September 2018 to 187 000 in September 2019—and increased food insecurity. The number of children with severe acute malnutrition increased by 20 per cent in the first half of 2019: from 160 000 in January to 190 000 in July.
The peace process and international stabilization efforts

A peace deal signed in 2015 between the government and some armed groups is supported by MINUSMA and international donors. As part of a road map adopted in March 2018 (to implement the 2015 peace agreement) and following the re-election of President Ibrahim Boubacar Keïta a few months later, the Malian Government embarked on ambitious political and institutional reforms. An October 2018 Pact for Peace in Mali between the Malian Government and the UN was meant to accelerate the implementation of the road map. A disarmament, demobilization and reintegration (DDR) process was launched a month later. In 2019 however, the relevance of these agreements continued to be undermined by the worsening security situation in central Mali, the dire humanitarian situation and the limited implementation of the peace agreement. According to a UN panel of experts on Mali constitutional reforms were delayed and the electoral calendar was scrapped pending an ‘inclusive political dialogue’—although there appeared to be limited opportunities for dialogue among the conflicting parties.

The expert panel also noted delays to the DDR process, although 63,000 combatants had been registered by mid-March 2019.

The international stabilization effort also appeared to be at a crossroads. Despite years of training and assistance French officials acknowledged that government security forces remained incapable of bearing the anti-jihadist fight. By the end of 2019 the effectiveness and wisdom of the French military mission, Operation Barkhane, was being increasingly questioned in the region and also in France—particularly following the rise of anti-French sentiment in the Sahel. Similarly, the JF-G5S has been criticized for its military-centric approach, poor coordination among partner countries and disagreements over its precise mandate. As noted above, far from stem-

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40 International Crisis Group (note 36).
ming the violence, international engagement and the actions of state security forces often appeared to be exacerbating instability.\textsuperscript{45}

There have also been questions over the effectiveness of MINUSMA’s efforts to help stabilize the country and protect civilians.\textsuperscript{46} It is by far the deadliest UN peace operation and continued to suffer more casualties than any other UN mission in 2019.\textsuperscript{47} Resolution 2480, adopted by the UN Security Council on 28 June 2019, renewed MINUSMA’s mandate for the fifth time, extending it to 30 June 2020. The Security Council decided that the mission’s ‘second strategic priority’, after support for implementation of the 2015 accord, would be to ‘facilitate’ a future Malian-led strategy to protect civilians, reduce intercommunal violence and re-establish state authority in the centre of the country.\textsuperscript{48} Without effective implementation of the 2015 peace agreement and the return of the rule of law and essential services throughout the country, armed attacks and communal violence are likely to continue in 2020.

\textbf{Niger}

Niger has been a key transit point for armed criminal and extremist Islamist groups operating in the Sahel region. Since 2015 the Nigerien army has been subject to increased attacks by such groups: by Boko Haram on the eastern part of the country, and since 2017 by groups near the borders with Burkina Faso and Mali.\textsuperscript{49} French Operation Barkhane and United States forces support the Nigerien armed forces in counterterrorism operations inside the country.\textsuperscript{50} Armed violence by non-state armed groups in neighbouring countries—Mali and Nigeria in particular—continued to spill across the border in 2019, and insecurity and attacks severely disrupted essential social services, exacerbated food insecurity and led to significant displacement. As


\textsuperscript{46} van der Lijn, J. et al., \textit{Assessing the Effectiveness of the United Nations Mission in Mali/MINUSMA} (Norwegian Institute of International Affairs: Oslo, 2019).

\textsuperscript{47} See chapter 2, section II, in this volume.


of October 2019 at least 440,000 people had been internally displaced and were living in vulnerable conditions across the country.\(^{51}\)

In December 2019 at least 71 Nigerien soldiers were killed in an attack by an unknown jihadist group in the west near the Malian border, the deadliest single attack against security forces in the country’s history.\(^{52}\) Conflict-related fatalities in Niger increased to over 700 in 2019 (including nearly 490 combat-related deaths), the highest level since 2015.\(^{53}\) There was also increased use of improvised explosive devices (IEDs) by armed groups, especially ISGS, in western Niger.\(^{54}\)

### Nigeria

The conflict dynamic involving government forces, Boko Haram and other non-state armed groups have devastated communities in north-east Nigeria, and the resulting humanitarian crisis remains one of the most severe in the world. Armed conflict, forced displacement and grave human rights violations, including killings, sexual violence, abduction and recruitment of child soldiers, have been widespread in Adamawa, Borno and Yobe states over the last decade.\(^{55}\) Insecurity in Nigeria is also fuelled by other complex security challenges, including separatist aspirations in eastern Nigeria, violence between sedentary farmers and nomadic herders in the country’s Middle Belt (an area that stretches across the middle third of the country

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\(^{51}\) OCHA (note 13), p. 57.


\(^{53}\) ACLED (note 25).

\(^{54}\) Pavlik, M. et al., ‘Explosive developments: The growing threat of IEDs in Western Niger’, ACLED, 19 June 2019. On the efforts to address the IED threat, see chapter 13, section I, in this volume.

from east to west) and the re-emergence of armed militant groups in the Niger Delta. The threat landscape in Nigeria may also be evolving with a burgeoning Shia inspired group, the Islamic Movement in Nigeria. In February 2019 election-related violence occurred around Nigeria's presidential election, leaving at least 40 dead. President Muhammadu Buhari won a second term, but his main challenger Atiku Abubakar rejected the result.

As of August 2019 nearly 2 million people were internally displaced, and another 240,000 were refugees in neighbouring countries. At the end of 2019 an estimated 7.7 million people were in need of humanitarian assistance, an 8 per cent increase from the end of 2018. An estimated 3 million people were food insecure as of September 2019, an increase from 2.7 million people since October 2018. In 2019 conflict-related fatalities in Nigeria were the fourth highest in the world at 5439 (see table 7.5), with the highest number of fatalities attributed to armed conflict (battles) between the Nigerian military and Boko Haram and the Islamic State West Africa Province (ISWAP, a Boko Haram splinter group).

Insurgency in the north-east

Although territory controlled by Boko Haram was recaptured by the Nigerian armed forces during 2015–16, and President Buhari has repeatedly claimed that the group has been defeated, it remained a serious threat in 2019. ISWAP was particularly active with several military successes, deepening roots in the civilian population and a growing membership (estimated at 3500–5000 fighters). In 2019 Borno state continued to be the epicentre of the conflict.

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59 OCHA (note 13), p. 58.
60 Kishi et al. (note 8), p. 20.
For example, at least a dozen soldiers were killed in an assault on an army base by ISWAP in June 2019, and the group carried out a series of attacks on the Nigerian army in northern Borno throughout September. In July a Boko Haram attack on a funeral and villages near Maiduguri in north-east Nigeria killed over 70 people. To end the insurgency the International Crisis Group suggested that the Nigerian Government will need to supplement its military campaign with measures that address the factors that contribute to the insurgency, including weak governance and a lack of basic services. Corruption and political misuse of Nigeria's security sector will also need to be addressed.

**Communal violence and resource conflicts**

Communal violence in Nigeria involves numerous actors and occurs across the country. In particular, conflicts over how to manage natural resources have spiralled into attacks on civilians by ethnic militias. In the Niger Delta region there is a conflict between militants and federal government over the control of petroleum resources. In the Middle Belt region and part of the north-west armed conflicts have occurred between mostly Christian farmers and predominantly Muslim herders, who have been migrating southward because of desertification, insecurity and the loss of grazing land to expanding settlements.

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