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Presenter: Commander, 3rd Brigade Combat Team, 25th Infantry Division Col. Patrick Stackpole

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DoD News Briefing with Col. Patrick Stackpole via Teleconference from Kirkuk, Iraq at the Pentagon

COL. KECK: Good morning, everyone. Mr. Whitman is delayed, so I will begin so we can get started because I don't want Colonel Stackpole to wait too long.

This is -- Colonel Stackpole, I know you can't see me. I'm Colonel Gary Keck. I'm the director of the Press Office. And Mr. Whitman may take over for me at any moment. But I'm going to go ahead and get this started.

We have with us today Colonel Patrick Stackpole, commander of the 3rd Brigade, 25th Infantry Division, the Lightning Division out of Hawaii. The Bronco Brigade deployed from Schofield Barracks to Kirkuk in August of 2006. Colonel Stackpole's men and women are assigned to Multinational Division North, and are partnering with their Iraqi counterparts in combat operations, as well as training and developing the Iraqi security forces in their area.

Colonel Stackpole is briefing us from Forward Operating Base Warrior in Kirkuk today. And I think it's the first time for him to be with us.

Colonel Stackpole, is that right, this is your first time?

COL. STACKPOLE: That's correct, Gary.

COL. KECK: We appreciate you spending some time with that. And I will, without further ado, turn it over to Colonel Stackpole for any opening comments and situational update he'd like to give you before we go into Q&A.

COL. STACKPOLE: Good morning, Gary, and thank you. Thank you all. I'm Colonel Pat Stackpole, the commander of 3rd Infantry Brigade Combat Team, 25 Infantry Division, based out of Schofield Barracks, Hawaii.

Bronco Brigade deployed to northern Iraq's Kirkuk province in August of last year and has since been partnered with Iraqi security forces, in conjunction with local government, to improve safety and security throughout the province.

Geographically, the Kirkuk province is approximately the size of Connecticut and lies 150 miles north of

Baghdad. The provinces of Salahuddin and Diyala border us to the southwest and southeast, respectively, and the provinces of Nineveh, Erbil and Sulimaniyah are situated to the north and east.

There are approximately 1.5 million people residing in the province, focused around seven major cities. The largest urban center is the city of Kirkuk itself, with an estimated total population of 1 million people.

However, the last official census was 1957. Since then, there have been several significant shifts in the ethnic population, due in large part to the Arabization under the former regime and the return of the Kurds and Turkoman since the fall of the regime in 2003.

Even with these significant shifts, Kirkuk boasts a long history of peaceful coexistence. Kurds, Arabs, Turkoman and Assyrians comprise both the ethnic and religious diversity of the region, and we have not seen the same level of ethnic nor sectarian strife that we've seen in other parts of Iraq. We believe this is due in large part to the population embracing its diversity and the overall resilience of the people of Kirkuk not to allow ethnic differences to divide them.

This province is also notable for its natural resources. The Khabbaz oil fields lie just outside the city of Kirkuk and are one of the two largest oil-producing regions in Iraq. There are an estimated 10 billion barrels of oil underneath Kirkuk, which represent approximately 40 percent of oil reserve and 70 percent of its natural gas production.

One natural resource that goes largely unrecognized is agriculture. Subsistence farmers are the dominant majority in the province outside of Kirkuk City. As such, agriculture is the primary sustainable resource in those rural areas. Hundreds of thousands of villagers that live and work outside of urban centers are tied directly, indirectly to agriculture. Crops such as corn, cotton, wheat and vegetables sustain the agricultural economy.

In short, the diversity of the population and the economic potential of its natural resources make Kirkuk a decisive city in Iraq.

Now that I've spoken of Kirkuk and its environment, allow me to discuss our role and our purpose for being here. The mission of the Bronco Brigade is to conduct partnered counterinsurgency operations and to train and develop the Iraqi security forces. We do this with our two infantry battalions, two support battalions, a field artillery battalion and the air cavalry squadron.

In addition, we have numerous military and police transition teams who are embedded trainers with our partnered Iraqi army and police units. We also have civil affairs teams that help transition and advise the local government.

Our partners in the counterinsurgency fight are the 2nd Brigade of the 4th Iraqi Army Division, the local provincial police and also the 1st Strategic Infrastructure Brigade. We work closely with each to assist in training the forces and to maintain security, protect the people, infrastructure and natural resources throughout the province.

Together we've conducted more than 900 partnered named operations at the brigade, battalion and company level, and thousands of platoon and section patrols. These operations have served not only to provide security to the people of the province but also to prepare the Iraqi army and the police to eventually achieve self-sufficiency.

The 2nd Brigade, 4th Iraqi Army Division, is becoming a truly effective, capable force.

The brigade has conducted six partnered brigade-level operations to increase security and create greater stability in the area. This month, the brigade headquarters achieved the capability to conduct independent

operations, the first brigade in Multinational Division- North. The 2-4 IA has also established their own counterinsurgency training school for Iraqi army companies, where basic and intermediate combat skills are enhanced through a rigorous and comprehensive 10-day training cycle.

The total number of police in the province are growing. Last month, nearly 900 graduated from the local police academy to join more than a thousand who graduated in the previous four training sessions. Citywide, police stations are beginning to complete the Iraqi police validation process, demonstrating their capability to conduct daily operations independently. In fact, the Iraqi police are the primary responsibility -- or have the primary responsibility for security in Kirkuk.

The battalions of the 1st Strategic Infrastructure Brigade patrol, secure and guard checkpoints to prevent oil smugglers and insurgents from sabotaging the key oil pipeline between Kirkuk and the Baiji oil refinery. The 1st and 5th Strategic Battalions conduct daily escort missions for technical teams to repair and rebuild the pipeline. These battalions have also prevented the destruction of crude oil supply for the past three months.

The anti-Iraqi forces we are working to defeat are ruthless with respect to their goals of power, dominance and violent ideology. Across the province, we face Islamic extremists, former regime elements and Ba'ath loyalists. While these organizations offer nothing but violence and rhetoric, attempts to discredit the government and coalition forces continue. Each day, through our partnership with the security forces, we work to counter these violent attacks by also extending the reach of the elected government. The Iraqi people's prosperity is the key.

Basic services, economic development and quality of life can be improved by ongoing efforts from Baghdad, the provincial government and local leadership. To assist with this, we work together with the Department of State's Provincial Reconstruction Team to ensure national programs reach the local citizens and local initiatives are started by their government.

In our efforts to conduct counterinsurgency operations, we've expanded our presence in the province with the creation and manning of several small patrol bases. With this increased presence, we are better able to deny insurgents freedom of movement and sanctuary while integrating more closely with the local population in building relationships that demonstrate our objectives are in line with their security and safety. As a result of this strategy to expand our presence, we've established freedom of movement on major routes in our area of operation, with focus on a road from Kirkuk south to Tikrit. We've identified and filled nearly 400 road craters and have increased our discovery rate of IEDs from 33 percent in September to 64 percent today.

We've captured 15 of the brigade and division's high-value individuals. These anti-Iraqi force leaders are responsible for financing, providing command and control, planning, providing weapons and many times conducting acts of violence themselves. We continue to gather actionable intelligence targeting cell leaders and their conspirators. We're also seeing an increased commitment to security by the civilian population.

With the continued assistance from local civilians, we've discovered more than 130 caches and destroyed more than 16,000 pounds of explosive ordnance. Together with the Provincial Reconstruction Team, we've improved essential services, financed significant economic development, helped bolster the public's confidence in their legal system, and facilitated the province's capability to govern themselves.

Since our arrival, the brigade has infused close to \$30 million into the various public works and other building, construction and business development projects. This supports the local economy with demands for labor forces, construction materials and quality construction contractors as well as providing basic service to the population.

Nearly 65 percent of the urban population has access to potable water, 60 percent for the rural population, and we continue to improve this through ongoing water projects. Nearly 80 percent of the urban

population is connected to the power grid, with reported maximum amount of power up to 20 hours a day and an average of around 16 to 18 hours a day. The province has upward of 70 primary health care centers and five hospitals able to provide health care to 90 percent of the population.

Let me finally transition to what I see as the road ahead for Kirkuk. First, Article 140 of the Iraqi constitution is an important political issue currently facing Kirkuk. Article 140 essentially allows for the citizens of Kirkuk to vote on their future. Identified within Article 140 are three stages -- normalization, a census, and finally, the referendum to determine the final status of the province and other disputed territories by the end of this year. While the wording and method of the referendum are not clearly defined, its resolution will ultimately decide the future of Kirkuk.

The implementation and timeline of each stage falls completely within the purview of the central government, its Council of Representatives and the National Article 140 Commission and also working with the local provincial government. Our role is to help provide a stable and secure environment for the Iraqis to determine how all this will proceed.

Kirkuk remains a dangerous place. We see daily IEDs, rocket attacks, kidnappings, murders and drive-by shootings, all used to intimidate the population and keep them out of the political process. Despite this, we see a resilience in the people, dedication on the part of the Iraqi security forces, and overall determination not to let the terrorists succeed.

Of course, much of our daily success is due to the governor and Kirkuk Provincial Council. We continue to work with both and are impressed by the capacity and maturity of the political leadership in this province to put ethnic differences aside and place the long-term needs of their communities above short-term ethnic gains. It's this mindset, along with the growing capability of the Iraqi security forces and the dedication of the soldiers of the Bronco Brigade, that Kirkuk as a province has progressed and will continue to do so.

Thank you very much. I'll now take your questions.

COL. KECK: Thank you, Pat, for that overview. And with that, we will go into Q&A, and remind you that Colonel Stackpole cannot see you, so please identify yourself and your news organization as you ask your questions.

Pam?

Q Colonel, this is Pam Hess with United Press International. Could you give us some sense of the amount of daily contacts or attacks you guys have across the province and how that's changed either from this time last year, if you have that data, or from when you-all first arrived?

And also, I was there in 2005, and right outside your gates there was a pretty squalid colony of returning Kurds, and I wonder what the status is with these IDPs around Kirkuk.

Are they in better condition? And has anything been worked out with where they're going to live?

COL. STACKPOLE: Okay, Pam, thank you.

As far as -- if you take the whole 10 months since we've been here, we do collect the data on daily attacks and IEDs, et cetera. As soon as we got here last August, there was a pretty big spike in -- basically it happened across Iraq, which kind of skews the data a little bit. On a daily basis, we'll have 10 to 35 IEDs, you know, three or four shootings of some type, and then murders, usually one or two a day in the in-town. A lot of times, basically, you have criminal activity, and then our patrols will probably make contact two to three times a day with some form of AIF forces.

Compared to last year at this time, it's higher. Compared to two years ago, it's higher by a factor of probably two. However, a lot of the contact is made by Iraqi security forces, where in the past it was made by coalition forces, and we see that as a good thing -- that they are -- because we can use that as a really -- in the information campaign to say, you know, shoot -- you're shooting at your own people, and they are doing a good job, and they're fighting back. In a lot of cases, they're a lot more effective than we are in certain places in the town, especially the police in Kirkuk City.

So again, I say across the board the attacks are higher than last year at this time, but the -- who they're going against, again, is skewed much more towards the ISF forces, and they're doing a good job.

As far as returning Kurds, if you came outside our gate today, there's not any refugee camps or anything like that outside the gate. There are IDP camps in the vicinity of Kirkuk, some at different levels of permanence. The vast majority of them have water, have some form electricity and are getting some basic services. They have schools. We've built a couple of schools that service these IDP camps, and again, they're moving quite a bit closer to permanence than what you saw two years ago.

Q Do you have a number for how many IDPs there are? And do you have an explanation for why the attacks are up?

COL. STACKPOLE: To go to that last one first, why the attacks are up, I think they're up across Iraq. I mean -- the most part they're trying to basically attack the ISF force and attack us to decrease the confidence in the ability of us to protect the populace. That's their goal. And they're going to continue to do so until we put an end to them.

Again, I think the fact that the ISF are standing up to them, the people are standing up to them, really bodes well for the future. Some of the larger spectacular attacks really in the last three or four months have declined rapidly, and so then we see that as a good thing.

Total number of Kurds that are in IDP camps, I won't get -- I can probably get an accurate number to you later, but I'm sure it's in the 40,000 to 50,000.

Q Thank you.

COL. KECK: Andrew.

Q Colonel, this is Andrew Gray from Reuters. Could you talk a little bit more about the referendum -- the prospect of a referendum? How concerned are you that that could lead to violence, could lead to more tension? And what are your recommendations in terms of how to minimize the prospect of that tension or that violence?

COL. STACKPOLE: Well, the Article 140, again, has three parts: normalization, which is basically changing Arabization back to the ethnic composition we had before in Kirkuk City, and then there's the census and then the referendum.

Again, the timing and the actual implementation of this we put on the political leadership, and they're working diligently to get after it. We will support that across the board from, you know, helping with the census and helping with security -- security or really anything that they need as far as getting it done.

Where we are with normalization, which you'd think would be the first part, we have about 3,600 applications have been turned in, and this in order to get the money and to get relocated, and to either move out or into the province. We think there's about 50,000 total applications, maybe a little more, that will eventually

come in. So they've got a long way to go in order to finish that. Will that have to be finished before we do the census and the referendum, also redrawing the boundaries? I think so. But we're going to continue to press and get the normalization piece done. We don't have an exact date for the census or referendum, however, the constitution does say the referendum should be done by December of this year.

The prospect of violence -- again, we're very concerned with that. You know, again, the Arabs for the most part, the Arab Sunni out to the west, want a delay in the implementation of Article 140. Turkomen also want that. And then the Kurds, of course, want to continue on and let's get this thing done.

Our objective -- and we talk to all those groups -- is to make sure everyone's keeping this in the political process. There's ways of talking about it and understanding where each others' views are that we can move ahead, rather than resorting to any violence. And so far, I think we've managed to do that.

Q Can you hear me? It sounds like the sound went off.

COL. KECK: (Off mike.)

Q Oh, okay. Sorry.

Colonel, Rick Whittle. I write for the Dallas Morning News. I was just wondering if the Iraqi forces in your area, what is their ethnic background? Are they all Kurds? And in your contact with the people there, would you say that they think of themselves primarily as Kurds, or do they think of themselves as Iraqis?

COL. STACKPOLE: The Iraqi security forces come from all ethnicities. Again, some of the ones that are stationed out in the west probably have a more Arab makeup, and some of the ones stationed in the east probably have more a Kurd makeup, but they're all mixed up. The police the same way -- they're all mixed.

Kirkuk as a city -- I mean, a person that grows up in Kirkuk, they speak three languages. They live together with each other, and all the time they speak Turkoman, they speak, you know, Kurdish and they speak Arabic, which is really pretty unique.

As far as the Kurds saying I'm a Kurd first or I'm Iraqi first, it really depends on who you talk to and when you talk to them. The Kurds were -- you know, obviously under Saddam Hussein were, you know, massacred in some cases and run off in others; I mean, it was very tough under him. And so they really do remember that, and they do rely on their Kurdish background for a lot of their own personal support. But the vast majority of the leadership, you know, is saying, hey, we're part of Iraq, we're Iraqis first.

The ISF -- again, across the board, they would say they're Iraqis first. The 2nd Brigade commander is a Kurd; he's got a Turkoman deputy, and they would say they're Iraqis first. They've deployed across Iraq, not just in Kirkuk. So I think it's -- I think there's -- again, do people identify with their ethnic background? Yes. Do they do so as part of the Iraqi security forces and take care or work for one over the other? The answer is no across the board.

COL. KECK: Jim.

Q Colonel, this is Jim Mannion from Agence France-Presse. I was wondering if you see any efforts by Shi'ite militias to establish themselves in the Kirkuk area.

COL. STACKPOLE: When it comes to most of the Shi'a groups -- again, the Shi'a in Kirkuk City or the vast majority of them are Turkoman, so it's a little different flavor than probably further down south.

The Shi'a organizations that are in Kirkuk are primarily there for I would say reconnaissance, for lack of a

better term, making sure that there is no -- understanding what's going on in Kirkuk, making sure that their people are not being persecuted and just gathering information. But we don't see large groups of Shi'a militia.

COL. KECK: Pam?

Q Thanks. It's Pam Hess again. Could you give us more details on how this normalization process will work?

Are the Arabs that were moved in -- and in what year, I don't know -- going to be asked to move out of houses, or are they providing money for the returning Kurds to build new houses?

COL. STACKPOLE: Pam, the answer is a little bit of both. Basically, if you get an approved claim and you're an Arab and you want to leave, then they will give you a certain amount of money. And that changes daily, but there's a certain amount of money that you will get that will allow you to relocate in some other area. Same thing for if you were a Kurd and were moved out; you get an approved claim and they say, yes, you're allowed to come back in, you will get a certain amount of money to either take over the home that you were in or to build a new home and get yourself settled in the area.

Q What if there's an Arab in your house who doesn't want to leave and you're a returning Kurd? What happens then?

COL. STACKPOLE: Well, currently, if you're an Arab, you do not have to leave the province, but you do have to leave any land that's being appropriated to someone else. And frankly, it goes into the legal system and that's how it's worked out. But they did make the decision that Arabs will not be forced to leave, and so it will be worked out as part of the claims process.

Q How many Arabs are affected by this? You said you had a total of 50,000 claims you expect. How does that break down between the ethnic groups?

COL. STACKPOLE: I'd have to get back to you. I mean, it's probably in the realm of, you know, 50-50, but I'd have to give you an accurate count later. And we can send that in.

COL. KECK: Gordon.

Q

Sir, it's Gordon Lubold with the Christian Science Monitor. I think you mentioned that one of the units is one of the first units to go independent in the north. Can you talk a little bit more about what their capabilities are and what they aren't, and what their challenges are in terms of logistics?

And also, totally separately, I wonder if you could talk about Iraqi losses, ISF and IP, in your area. How many have -- how many counted casualties are you seeing there?

COL. STACKPOLE: Sure. What has happened is, 2nd Brigade of the 4th IA, because of the training that they've gone through, are able to conduct independent operations. They can plan, prepare and execute an independent operation.

Some of their battalions are a little more challenged, and due to training, in some cases; to their manning, in some cases; and logistics, as you identified.

The biggest problem with the Iraqi security forces is just that mobility, weapons and the -- and mostly mobility, both fuel and maintenance and getting new trucks. If they operate around here, just like we do, you run

into IEDs on practically a daily basis, which, you know, destroy some trucks, which damages trucks, you know, that need to be repaired. And it's very difficult to get the Iraqi army logistics system -- to get them a new engine, get them new tires and get those vehicles back out on the road. And so we help a lot with that in order to make sure that they're mobile enough to conduct operations.

So that is a problem, and that's probably the biggest problem they have, is their logistics -- replacement and sustainment while they're in the field.

As far as casualties, over the past 10 months we've been here, we've lost approximately 70 IA soldiers and 50 IP in the province during that time frame. And you can probably multiply that by three or four times for the number of wounded.

Q Thanks. If I could just follow up on the first part of it, do you sense like a cultural resistance to doing for themselves when they see the Americans or the coalition forces there to kind of do for them? We often get a sense of that. I wonder if you see that in that particular. Or is it just an inability or -- because of their own capabilities or their own equipment to do for themselves?

COL. STACKPOLE: I guess you could probably find some units and some Iraqi army, Iraqi police, soldiers that don't do that.

For the most part, we've had pretty good results in training them to be able to execute, you know, what they need, including maintenance, including building fortifications, including manning TCPs. It's a continual challenge, and you got to keep working with them.

But the biggest problem is spare parts and spare equipment in order to replace losses and to fill them to their full authorization. But I don't really see a -- it's not across the board a cultural resistance to work to get their logistics systems up.

Q Thanks.

Q Colonel, Bill McMichael with the Military Times papers. Can you give us a rough idea of how you're deployed throughout the region? And we've heard a lot about combat outposts and joint security stations you have in Baghdad. How are you deployed in Kirkuk, your troops, in -- not only in the city but the province surrounding?

And also, what sort of dealings are you -- let me rephrase that. Are you working with -- as they're doing in Anbar and some other provinces, Diyala, working with tribal leaders, as well as with the local politicians, to try for reconciliation and solve some of these problems?

COL. STACKPOLE: Right. We do not have, like, patrol bases in downtown Kirkuk City. For the most part, the police have a pretty good handle on that, and we basically move to support them with basically heavy weapons or, you know, if they run into something that they can't handle as far as an IED, we send EOD teams out. And so for the most part, we do reaction into the city. Obviously, our FOB is right outside, and we're able to do that.

Out in the west, we've built several small patrol bases to basically allow us to have quick reaction forces and observation on major routes out to the west. So we're very dispersed in basically platoon-size elements throughout the AO, and it really has allowed us to do two things. One, we're there when something happens; we don't have to move all the way from Kirkuk, you know, through areas that possibly could have IEDs in them and slow us down, and we're there to react to anything that happens out in the smaller villages out to the west quickly. We have observation, we conduct patrols from out there to be able to attack the enemy in their sanctuaries.

But in -- secondly, it's allowed us to really engage with the population, understand and get to know them, and for them to get to know us as well.

As far as working with the tribes, from day one we were constantly talking to tribal leaders trying to get them engaged in political process vice, you know, in violence. And we are taking a lot of lessons learned. I talk every day about different approaches throughout Iraq, and we are taking a lot of lessons learned out of Anbar province to move ahead with that. But engagement with the tribes is an ongoing daily process from down by squad level all the way through myself.

Q Your counterparts in Anbar and to some extent Diyala are reporting some success in doing that. How would you rate how well that's going, what sort of progress you've made in terms of dealing with the tribes?

COL. STACKPOLE: I really don't -- can't talk about what's going on down in Diyala, but I hear -- I think that some of the things that I've seen going on in Anbar province, I think we are poised to be able to work with them. I think a lot of the tribes that we have here over in Kirkuk were disarmed early on, and so they weren't -- you know, I didn't have quite the same capabilities as maybe some of the tribes out there.

We've really focused on getting them to just use us. Let us know, you know, where the insurgents are, what they're doing, what their patterns are, and we'll go ahead and take care of them.

Eventually we want to get security under the Iraqi security forces. There needs to be police and army, legitimate forces, that are executing that. In the short term, we are talking with the tribes, working with them for all forms of intelligence, and trying to get their cooperation to, at a minimum, not support insurgents. And let us know what's going on so that we can attack and destroy them.

COL. KECK: AI?

Q Colonel, I wanted to ask about the reconstruction effort. This is AI Pessin from Voice of America. Do you have the staffing and the specialities that you need in the PRT? And do you feel like enough is being done on that front for the long-term hearts and minds effort that has to go along with the security effort?

COL. STACKPOLE: Thanks, AI. One thing we have here in Kirkuk province really is a functional government. We have a functional provincial council that looks at all the projects and works with the Baghdad government in order to basically work their own projects. So we're not out here totally on our own.

As far as our PRT manning, basically recently we have got a lot of specialities in the PRT that have really helped us, primarily in agriculture and then also in economics, that really have helped us a lot. So we're seeing a better resourcing of the PRT to provide that assistance.

But we work through the provincial government, but we try -- in all of our projects we run through the provincial council to make sure they're synchronized and we don't build schools that don't have teachers or we don't build water projects and not get the pipes to connect them up. All those things, again, it's really helped to be able to have a functional government that can help synchronize those things.

And as far as the PRT, I think we've got some better level of skill and expertise to help us out with that.

COL. KECK: Well, Pat, we are at the end of our time. We started a little late. We appreciate your input and the contributions of the Tropic Lightning Division, especially your brigade there in Iraq. And we would like to give you an opportunity to provide any closing comments that you'd like to give or anything else that you think's important for the Pentagon press corps to know.

COL. STACKPOLE: Well, thank you, and thank you for the opportunity to address you and the American people about the state of affairs here.

We do want to continue to keep you informed about what's going on up here in Kirkuk. We do think this is a, you know, microcosm of Iraq and it's really a decisive province. What happens here really can show the way for cooperation, from ethnicities through religions here in Kirkuk. And we think we're progressing towards that.

It's still a dangerous place. There's a lot of violence every single day. The Iraqi security forces, though, are standing up, and I'm proud of them. We conduct operations every single day partnering side by side with them, and I think we're on the way. I'm very optimistic about the future here.

I'd also like to thank our families back home. The Bronco families have endured a lot of sacrifice. They've endured us getting to stay here a little bit longer, and they've managed to handle that with a lot of class and are supporting us tremendously. Their letters and care packages have a tremendous influence on the morale of our soldiers. We also have, you know, airmen out here as well, and we also have Navy guys, so for the most part, we really appreciate all the things that they've done for us.

So thank you for what you've done for us, and we appreciate your support. I know you will out in the future. And with that, thank you very much.

COL. KECK: Thank you again, Colonel Stackpole.

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