

Colombia in Conflict, Venezuela in Crisis

Report by Diego Filmus

On Thursday, February 6th, 2003, a panel of four speakers expressed contrasting views on the current situation in Colombia and Venezuela, with a focus on Canadian foreign policy toward each. Two representatives of the federal Department of Foreign Affairs and International Trade (DFAIT), Jeanette Sautner and Michael Harvey, outlined Canadian foreign policy towards Venezuela and Colombia, respectively. Maria Paez Victor and Bill Fairbairn, informed civil society actors, offered a critical perspective on government perceptions and policies vis-à-vis these troubled neighbouring states.

Jeanette Sautner, Second Secretary of the General Relations Section of the Embassy of Canada to Venezuela, began by reviewing President Hugo Chávez's path to power and the political scene in Venezuela over the past two years. She described the election of Chávez as "a radical departure from the [prior two-party] power-sharing arrangement that [had] lasted since 1958," noting that he received enormous support from "not only the poor, but also those who wanted a change" and an end to corruption. His reelection in 2000, considered legitimate even by his opposition, re-affirmed his popular mandate, and support for the new Constitution introduced by his administration was measured at 60%.

Nonetheless, organized opposition to Chávez's government has expanded into what Sautner labeled "a loose coalition of labour, business, and traditional and non-traditional political parties, as well as non-governmental organizations representing civil society," adding that this inchoate coalition has "no unifying ideology or goal - beyond removing Chávez."

Since the failed coup against his rule, Sautner observed, Chávez briefly attempted some gestures to placate certain stated objections of opposition forces to his rule; for example, he desisted in his use of a military uniform and lessened the appointment of military personnel to posi-

tions of power. After the coup, pressure against him had been of a more quiet nature until September 2002.

Then, "the pressure really got strong." Enormous anti-government demonstrations were organized, one, on October 10th, reaching between one to two million people in number. The events were mainly peaceful until the December shooting incident, regarding which the actors and motives remain unclear. These actions culminated in a national strike beginning on December 2nd. The strike kept stores closed through the Christmas holidays, noted Sautner, despite the importance of the date for most Venezuelans, representing the degree of determination of the opposition. Estimates of strike participation ranged from 60 to 90% based on the region, according to Sautner.

Although the general strike had terminated by the date of this event, the oil industry remained a crucial exception. Oil is vital to the national economy, but the industry was producing at only 20 to 30% its capacity under strike conditions; no refining was being done and the country was suffering a shortage of gas.

Canada, Sautner stated, is "supporting [General Secretary of the OAS Cesar] Gaviria's efforts to broker between both parties... [and] the role of the Group of Friends." Goodwill is required from both sides, she asserted: "we are concerned about the impasse... We support both sides and advocate compromise." She noted that agreement had been reached on some 19 of a total 22 points and resolution was anticipated soon.

Sautner finished by acknowledging the one-sidedness and antagonism of the media in Venezuela, characterizing them as a "political actor [with] a clear agenda - they want Chávez out." Nonetheless, she observed, no official media repression was evident; no reporters had been arrested and all media remained active, although

reporters have been subject to street-level harassment and violent attacks.

Responding to Sautner's account, **Maria Paez Victor** reiterated many of the points outlined in her background paper: "Why Canada Should Support Chávez" (see reference, below).

Victor began by drawing parallels, hypothetical and real, between political events in Venezuela and Canada, to illustrate what she perceived to be a bias in attitudes toward the handling of the political crisis confronting Chávez.

"Would Canada have taken the same stance [i.e. in treating it as an issue between two legitimate parties] when the FLQ kidnapped people? Then, the state felt threatened and defended itself. War measures were taken and Quebequois were forbidden to take up arms. In Venezuela, a democracy, the opposition has staged a coup and an oil strike, and has advocated and employed violence - Canada should condemn this. Does Canada support this kind of behaviour? Why, then, would Canada support *both sides* of the crisis?"

Victor probed further: "Imagine if Hydro One went on an illegal strike to sabotage the Canadian government. Imagine if they cut off electricity to the entire province, and said 'We will only stop when the Prime Minister resigns.' They would be thrown in jail if they continued! Especially if before they went on strike, they had committed sabotage and stole state goods... It would be considered terrorism, as an attack against vital infrastructure, against the state, the country."

She emphasized that Canada, as a country that values democracy and the rule of law, should recognize the seriousness of the threat that opposition actions pose to political process and constitutional rule in Venezuela - "regardless of whether you like Chávez or not."

Responding to Sautner's observation that the opposition strike had caused Venezuelans to 'miss Christmas,' she noted that this was claim was a propaganda ploy, true only for a small portion of Venezuelans - those of "Caracas of the East, where the big malls were closed, affecting the upper classes." In the 'other Caracas', stated Victor, stores were open and people celebrated Christmas as best they could, "being not so rich."

Moving beyond a contemporary analysis of the crisis, Victor emphasized that a "historical viewpoint is crucial." After "forty years of corrupt rule" (pre-Chávez Venezuela ranked second only to Russia in corruption, according to Fortune Magazine), the country has finally begun to move away from being a "very violent democracy."

Whereas for Victor the previous elite power-sharing pact (the *punto fijo*) was merely a means of institutionalizing the division of oil profits among the financial oligarchy through its political puppets, under Chávez she considers the state to have finally taken up its responsibility to society at large as it uses state oil revenues for the advancement of much-needed social services.

She also contrasted current state tolerance of a very aggressive media and opposition to the previous brutality that reigned between the administrations of Betancourt and Leone, when "people were killed on the streets. Over 300 journalists were killed under the rule of Andres Perez alone. The newspapers that then published blank pages to protest censorship are the same ones that are now freely protesting against Chávez," she noted, "and the only TV station shut down [under Chávez], when it was destroyed [by opposition forces] in April, was the one belonging to the government."

On the media role more generally, Victor denounced its performance as "a disgrace... they are utterly lacking in professionalism or a sense of the role of journalism. The media shows utter bias and total subservience to only one side of the political dispute."

Victor suggested that all the exaggerated media concern about government violence contrasts sharply with its silence regarding the real violence of the opposition, which has made death threats and regularly employs racial slurs in their at-

tacks on Chávez. "This would not be allowed in Canada. The opposition talks about 'getting rid of Chávez *by any means.*' Canadians believe in the rule of law and democracy. Whoever wins the elections, governs, and the opposition can compete with him in the next election if they do not like him."

Victor ended with an appeal for Canadian support for the current government in Venezuela, not only to support the principle of democracy, but also because "Chávez's new Constitution and laws are the most democratic the country has known and seek to redress historic wrongs, such as the fact that 80% of the population in such a rich country continue to live in dire poverty."

Following the presentations on Venezuela, the panel turned to the topic of Colombia. First to speak was **Michael Harvey**, the First Secretary and Head of the Political Section of the Canadian Embassy in Bogotá, Colombia.

Harvey focused his presentation on Canada's role in the present context, especially vis-à-vis human rights and the peace process.

The human rights situation in Colombia, opined Harvey, is "awful," and Canada has, he explained, "grave concern over the links between military and paramilitary." Canada's approach to the issue is to act multilaterally, through existing institutions such as the Commission for Human Rights in Geneva.

Canada also supports the work of the UN Human Rights office in Colombia, whose broad mandate involves working with the government to improve the efficacy of the judicial authorities, stated Harvey, and the Canadian government effectively takes its cue on the issue of human rights in Colombia from the language in the annual statement by the Chair of this body.

Bilaterally, the Canadian Embassy's work is largely focused upon meeting with human rights defenders in Bogotá and elsewhere, mainly in order to help them to obtain greater legitimacy "in the eyes of the Colombian government and the illegal armed groups that threaten them." Toward the same end, Embassy officials meet with Colombian authorities to endorse the work of human rights groups.

Additionally, the Canadian Embassy runs a "Source Refugee Program", to "directly accept Colombians [still in their country of origin] who don't have a security solution in Colombia." This goes beyond the requirements of the Geneva Convention regarding refugees, noted Harvey, which only requires the refugees be given "fair process when they arrive to our shores." Canada received 1000 such refugees last year and expects to receive an additional 1200 this year.

Canada provides \$12 million annually to Colombia through CIDA. Assistance is focused mainly on the needs of internally displaced people, of whom there are at least 2 million at present, and on supporting human rights work by NGOs, both national and international (e.g. Peace Brigades International). CIDA also administers a 'gender fund' to promote women's political participation.

Turning to the peace process, Harvey stated that "Canada, though not a direct player, supports a negotiated solution to the conflict." Moreover, noted Harvey, while "Canada does not speak to illegal armed groups, [within] the framework of the peace process, we were facilitators between the FARC and the government on several occasions." Now that these processes have ceased, the Canadian government works through multilateral initiatives of organizations like the OAS on issues related indirectly to the conflict, such as small arms proliferation, drug trafficking, etc. Concluding, Harvey asserted that as "general rule, he tries to meet with as many people as possible to understand how Colombians view the problem."

Bill Fairbairn, a Researcher/Policy Advocate on human rights in Latin America with KAIROS: Canadian Ecumenical Justice Initiatives, completed the initial panel presentations by addressing the shortcomings of Canadian foreign policy in Colombia.

Fairbairn, who has monitored human rights in Colombia since 1988, traveling there three times a year since 1989, observed that "Canadian foreign policy towards Colombia has changed significantly in the last decade." He described the current human rights situation as "bleak," with an average of 20 disappearances taking place per day - a rate double that of 1989 "and the situation grows more serious daily." The numbers of internally

displaced people is also “unprecedented;” Fairbairn observed that Colombia’s displaced population is now second largest in the world.

While the armed conflict that preoccupies the Canadian government is a major concern, stated Fairbairn, the more serious and neglected issue is that of the social conflict in Colombia. The maintenance of extreme and systemic social inequities in Colombian society, through the violent oppression of any effort at promoting even moderate reform, leads to the bulk of human rights violations. The daily murder of Church workers, journalists, and union leaders is not directly linked to the armed conflict, and will not be resolved by the negotiated settlement being sought among armed actors.

Fairbairn shares the perspective of many NGO actors working on these issues, who consider the Canadian government too quick to celebrate the promises and proclamations of progress made by the Colombian government. He considers the Colombian government to be very astute in these matters, in producing a regular flow of reports to placate criticisms, in which emphasis is given to government “achievements” and progress in the creation of “mechanisms” by which to better ensure respect for human rights and the rule of law.

Fairbairn emphasizes: “The problem is not the absence of laws or institutions, but rather the lack of will to render them effective – to take tangible actions that produce real results. They are constantly adopting this-or-that measure, but nothing is done. The Canadian government grants far too much credibility to the Colombian government in this regard.”

Additionally, Fairbairn observed that it has been clearly and extensively documented that “the paramilitaries are an extension of the [Colombian] armed forces, and the death squads operate hand-in-glove with the army,” though these relationships are downplayed by the Canadian government. Systematic collusion of this nature is represented by the Canadian government as a matter of there being “a few bad apples” within the Colombian military.

Denials of systematicity in military-paramilitary links are belied by the fact that, for example, high-ranking officers whose paramilitary involvement has come

to light have not been removed from service; rather, they have been promoted – even given medals, as in the case of General Qiñones. Equally telling are experiences such as Fairbairn’s when, on a recent trip, he encountered a paramilitary roadblock a mere two minutes outside of a military base; at the base, General Rito, known to be involved with drug trafficking, dubiously claimed no knowledge of the roadblock.

In light of such facts, Fairbairn considers it to be most counter-productive that the Canadian government habitually parrots the views of its Colombian counterpart: attributing the lack of progress in defending human rights in Colombia to a lack of government capacity and, hence, proclaiming the government’s need for greater resources, including arms. This does not accord with the broad NGO assessment of the problem which instead points to the Colombian government’s complete lack of political will to implement effective measures to curtail systematic human rights abuses – abuses in which the government itself is implicated through the unimpeded actions of the Colombian military and their proxies.

Fairbairn recognized that Canada does seek to provide a safe space for persecuted Colombian social actors, such as indigenous leaders and union activists, to express their concerns – through the UN, the OAS, and the Commission for Human Rights in Geneva, for example. However, he questioned the utility of such efforts when Canadian policies do not enhance the safety of these people back at home. Thus, in a recent incident, after a Colombian community leader addressed the Chair of the Commission on Human Rights in Geneva, his family in Colombia began immediately to receive death threats.

While Canada ‘supports the annual statement of the Chair’, as Harvey asserted, Canada does nothing to actually ensure that the Colombian government abides by the Chair’s demands, claimed Fairbairn. So, for example, while the Chair demands that the Colombian government address the issue of impunity, the Colombian government has stated that it will not respect the jurisdiction of the new International Criminal Court (ICC) on the issue of war crimes until seven years from now; at the same time, it denies visas to foreigners like Fairbairn who are attempting to independently monitor human rights or who

are seeking to provide protective accompaniment to people at imminent risk. What’s more, when an atrocity takes place, human rights activists in the country are still denied entry to the site of the event for eight days, giving ample time to hide evidence.

Although Canada rhetorically supports the Chair’s statement on issues such as impunity, then, this stance is proven meaningless unless the Canadian government, with other international actors, ensures that there are political costs for Colombian non-compliance. Indeed, for Fairbairn there is a genuine need for Canada to take a more active role on specific issues - such as that of impunity - where real improvements could accrue from such political consistency with our avowed concerns.

The **discussion period** following the panelists presentations centered upon several points of contention between the panelists and also brought to light several unmentioned issues.

First, Sautner responded to Victor’s critique on Canadian policy toward Venezuela by re-wording one of her earlier statements: “We *do not* support both sides – we want a constitutional solution.”

The debate then turned to the audience, where some heated criticisms were directed at Victor’s presentation. One audience member asked why alleged saboteurs were not being put in jail (unless, suggested the person asking, governmental claims of sabotage are false). Another asked whether or not there were political prisoners in Venezuela under Chávez.

Victor, responding to the first question, said: “There is a judicial process that is going on. There must first be an investigation – you can’t just accuse and grab them and throw them in jail – this is a democracy with a judicial system.” As for the evidence someone raised regarding the existence of a political prisoner in Venezuela, Victor echoed the comments in her written statement: “There are no political prisoners in Venezuela, no refugees, no displacement of populations and no ‘disappeared’ people.”

Next, questions were directed to the panelists with expertise on Colombia. One audience member asked: “Since Alvaro Uribe came to power in Colombia, are things getting better or worse in terms of human rights?”

Fairbairn responded that he is “very concerned about Uribe,” in large part because he “is seen as the ‘candidate of the paramilitary groups.’” One of Uribe’s plans was to create a network of one million ‘spies,’ by enrolling ‘voluntary’ citizen surveillance and reporting to the authorities. This network of spies condones paramilitary activity and has been criticized by the High Commissioner on Human Rights. Currently, the Colombian trade union movement is under attack – there were well over a hundred leaders killed last year. There is an increasing number of arbitrary raids and apprehensions. And all this is linked to the network of spies who call in with tips on subversive activity.

Fairbairn aimed further criticism at the Uribe regime by exposing his “democratic security” policy as a strategy for taking over territory. He added, “the army doesn’t want witnesses – no observers or human right watchers”, which is why it is making it harder for foreigners to enter the country.

Fairbairn pointed out that foreign, including Canadian, commercial interests in Colombia may play a detrimental role in affairs there: “A lot of the fighting is happening in areas rich in resources (i.e. mining) with strong foreign corporate interests.” Canadian mining companies, in particular, are eager to gain access to some of these conflict-ridden areas. He emphasized the need for stronger laws guiding the ethics of Canadian multinationals. Fairbairn added that another area of flawed Canadian policy was exposed when Canadian military helicopters ended up in the hands of the Colombian government after being sold to the US government. Fairbairn pleaded that the loophole that does not require end-user certificates must be filled.

Harvey answered the original question pertaining to Uribe’s presidency in Colombia by saying: “Uribe was elected to office with a bad hand: a bad economy, and a bad peace process.” He argued that some positive things have happened under Uribe, as demonstrated by his increasing support, which is now at “70% of the population,” because “he is seen as a hard worker and honest.”

Harvey added, “Capacity and a lack of professionalism is a big problem.” He also stated that there is “no chance to win a guerrilla war” as a ratio of ten conven-

tional soldiers to every guerilla is recommended for success. He also avoided calling the conflict a “civil war” because “there aren’t two sides to the conflict” Instead, for Harvey there is the government on one hand and, on the other, various guerrilla groups with little legitimacy “and almost no civilian support... They are more criminal than anything else.”

Agreeing with the argument that “poverty is a large part of the problem”, he countered Fairbairn by asserting, “Canadians are encouraged to invest there, as long as it’s done ethically.” As for the sale of Canadian helicopters, he said end-use certificates are not issued on sales of military equipment to the US, though they are issued for military equipment sold to any other country, because our military industry is so closely linked to that of the US.

Discussion then shifted to a more general theme: that of neo-liberal policies and their effects on deepening race and class privileges in Colombia and Venezuela.

First, Jeanette Sautner questioned the proposition that neo-liberal policies exacerbate conflict. She pointed out: “Much of the Venezuelan elite is anti-free trade.” Additionally, she does not see Venezuelan social stratification along ethnic lines, but rather class lines, although at the same time she admitted that the “poor are darker” and the “rich are lighter.”

Maria Paez Victor replied that the IMF has played a significant role in structuring the Venezuelan economy along historical lines of exclusion and impoverishment. The 1989 riots emerged in reaction to the exclusion of the past forty years. The president of the time then brought out the army and killed an estimated 3000 “unarmed, brown Latin Americans,” and this “gave rise to Chávez”, who attempted a coup but failed.

Chávez took full responsibility for the failed coup, but was seen as a hero. He went to jail for two years, came back and campaigned against neo-liberalism. The government had been selling the country to foreigners – “this is why 80% of the country is poor.”

Chávez was elected on the platform that he would not privatize his country to the advantage of foreign oil companies. Victor stated her approval for this stance, pointing out how Argentina was a model IMF student, “bowing down and accepting all

the orders – and that country has since fallen tremendously.” Chávez took exactly the opposite economic policies. The elites quickly realized that they had to get rid of him, Victor claimed.

On the issue of racism, Victor asserted that Venezuelan society is very racist, and suggested that at the next Embassy party Sautner step back and assess the colour of the social elite who gather there. At the same time, she admitted that racism “isn’t just about the colour – it’s how that colour is perceived,” and that in Venezuela, the richer you are, the lighter you are taken to be.

Regarding Canada she added, “the one good thing about the Canadian Embassy is it is not the American Embassy! It has not interfered by heavily favouring the coup.” The kind of political pluralism and democratic tolerance that exists in Canada must be transmitted to the political elites of Venezuela, she asserted.

Regarding the effects of neo-liberalism upon the Colombian conflict, Michael Harvey made the government stance clear: “our philosophy is that free trade is beneficial for Colombia.” He also left questions of Colombian policy largely unchallenged: “Plan Colombia is an internal affair of Colombia. Military assistance is legitimate, provided it follows international law.” In an internal conflict, the Colombian government is allowed to “defend itself and we respect that right – this is the official Canadian position.”

Bill Fairbairn responded with a critique of Canadian support of neo-liberalism in Colombia. Contrary to the official Canadian position, there has been a growing gap of income distribution, exacerbating the conflict since the *apertura* (opening). Predictably, the neo-liberal opening of the economy to foreign investment has been accompanied by massive repression of trade unions, with trade unionists being killed at an obscene rate in the very sectors in which Canadian corporations wish to invest. There is a “close link between privatization and union repression... Harvey claims investment is supported [only] when it is ethical. But stronger regulation is needed.”

Fairbairn then proceeded to address Plan Colombia, which he described as “very disturbing for Colombians who wanted peace.” When the Plan was introduced, it halted the peace process and escalated the

arms build-up. While it was initially sold as a Plan to deal with drug trafficking, it is now clear that it is protecting oil interests and pipeline construction. Post-September 11 counter-narcotic and counter-insurgency efforts are now virtually indistinguishable. However, Fairbairn warned, the drug problem cannot be dealt with through military force. Peasant farmers are simply trying to survive and coca is often the best alternative, especially under neo-liberal conditions in which it has become impossible for small peasants to compete with cheap, highly subsidized food imports.

Fairbairn noted further that there are good reasons for the popular perception that Uribe is a 'candidate of the paramilitaries.' Indeed, asserted Fairbairn, whatever talks are taking place, "this is not a peace process." When there are clear links between paramilitaries and the military, how can they be negotiating peace between them? On this, Canada has said nothing – officially, we are "neutral," as stated by David Kilgour when he was the Secretary of State for Latin America and Africa.

The final topic of debate was that of the role of foreign oil interests in the Venezuelan crisis. Victor made no reservations about her position: "It's about oil. The rest of the world would not care if Venezuela didn't have oil. Kuwait was rescued because of oil – Rwanda wasn't because it doesn't have oil."

American intervention in Venezuela is no secret either, she added: The New York Times on December 13 wrote that the US's "National Endowment for Democracy, flooded Venezuela with millions of dollars going to groups opposing Chávez." When the coup occurred, and Carmona made himself president, the first to congratulate him was the US ambassador; Ari Fleischer then openly congratulated him on television. But when Chávez was brought back by the masses and the military, suddenly the US was silent. And when the oil strikes commenced, Bush openly called for new elections. The US has clearly backed the coup and favoured Chávez's opposition.

To conclude, Victor called for greater Canadian-Venezuelan solidarity. As is true for Canada, she observed, the US is Venezuela's main trading partner. But the US will listen more to Canada than to much less powerful states in Latin America.

Canada has a long tradition of mediating in international affairs, and in promoting peaceful solutions to conflicts. Thus, "Canada has a role to play as a buffer in the region; to buffer unchecked US power." Victor then pleaded that Canada, "hop off the fence – [quit] following the OAS, and start leading it!"

Victor reminded the audience that the only way out of the crisis in Venezuela is a constitutional amendment to reduce Chávez's term from 6 years to 4 years or let the constitution to follow its course. This could mean waiting until August for a referendum. However, American impatience is growing because of the impending Iraqi war. Her final caution summed up the growing interdependence of affairs in the region: "If Chávez is overthrown and the constitution is abolished, there will be terrible conflict in Venezuela, and I don't doubt that this conflict may become linked to the conflict in Colombia."



About the speakers:

Bill Fairbairn has monitored human rights in Colombia for more than a decade. Bill was formerly Executive Director and South America Programme Coordinator for the Inter-Church Committee on Human Rights, and now is a Researcher/Policy Advocate on human rights in Latin America with KAIROS: Canadian Ecumenical Justice Initiatives.

Michael Harvey has been First Secretary and Head of the Political Section of the Canadian Embassy in Bogota (Colombia) since August 2000. He focuses on human security, human rights, and the political implications of the Colombian conflict. He was part of the Security Council team at Canada's Mission to the United Nations from 1998 to 2000 and represented Canada at negotiations on Security Council resolutions for East Timor, Sierra Leone, and Iraq Sanctions, among others. He joined DFAIT in 1996. Michael holds degrees in Political Science from the University of Ottawa and in Civil Law from McGill University.

Jeanette Sautner (Hon.BA, Trent University, 1993, LLB, University of Toronto, 1998) joined DFAIT as a Political/Economic Officer in 2000 after a number of years in the private sector and at the former Revenue Canada. At headquarters, she practiced as a lawyer in the

Trade Law Division from 2000 to 2001, working on a WTO appeals case and a NAFTA Chapter 11 case. She is currently posted to Caracas, Venezuela as Second Secretary in the General Relations section.

Maria Paez Victor, M.A. (Sociology, University of Canterbury), Ph.D. (Sociology, York) was born in Caracas, Venezuela and obtained her first degree there from the Andres Bello University. She taught health and environmental policies at York and at U of T, is a former policy advisor to the leader of the Liberal Opposition in Ontario and to the Law Society of Upper Canada, and currently works as a consultant (Victor Research) on social, health and environmental issues in Canada and internationally. She is also affiliated with the Centre for Health Studies at York University.

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Other CERLAC publications on these topics:

"Why Canada Should Support Chávez" by Maria Paez Victor. CERLAC Bulletin: http://www.yorku.ca/cerlac/2-1_Victor.pdf

Fueling War: The Impact of Canadian Oil Investment on the Conflict in Colombia. Scott Pearce. CERLAC Working paper, November 2002. <http://www.yorku.ca/cerlac/ABSTRACTS.htm#Pearce>

Colombia: Internal Displacement And Humanitarian Crisis. 2001 Michael Baptista Lecture by Amanda Romero-Medina. <http://www.yorku.ca/cerlac/ABSTRACTS.htm#Romero-Medina>

Violence And Peace-Building In Colombia Conference report by Sabine Neidhardt and Sheila Simpkins. <http://www.yorku.ca/cerlac/ABSTRACTS.htm#Violence&Peacebuilding>

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