

Report

Living on a one-way ticket: self-reliance in the Mon resettlement sites

I. Introduction

The primary armed group fighting in the name of Mon people agreed to a cease-fire in 1995. Though this ended armed hostilities between the group and Burma's State Peace and Development (SPDC) government, human rights abuses committed against residents of Burma's southern peninsula continue. This abuse, combined with a weak economic situation directly related to army abuses, has resulted in the movement of thousands of people whose homes are unsafe and/or economically untenable. Many of these people have, as one academic has said, "found their backs to Thailand" and have ended up in resettlement sites along the Thai-Burma border.

To the south of the Three Pagodas Pass border crossing into Thailand is a section of territory controlled by the NMSP. This territory is home to 3 primary resettlement sites that stretch from southernmost Karen State into Mon State and Tenasserim Division. Residents of these three resettlement sites – which total at least 10,000 people – have been pushed in recent years to become "self-reliant," a push that is both a goal and born out of necessity as international aid support declines. The returned refugees, however, report that there are a series of obstacles to becoming truly self-reliant. Understanding these obstacles is the purpose of this report.

II. Background

A. Factors motivating displacement

Through the 1990s, the primary factor driving people from their homes and villages was armed conflict between the New Mon State Party (NMSP) and SPDC and related human rights abuses. When the NMSP and SPDC agreed to a ceasefire in 1995, however, the abuses did not necessarily cease. There are a variety of reasons for this; continued conflict between smaller armed Mon splinter groups like the Monland Restoration Party (MRP) and a group lead by Nai Chan Dein, as well as the Karen National Union (KNU); a continuation of the *Pya Ley Pya* "Four Cuts" policy in which the SPDC weakens insurgents by targeting their civilian supporters; gas pipelines running east into Thailand and north towards factories in Karen State; SPDC policy which encourages its armed forces to extract resources from local communities; lack of oversight and accountability for large numbers of soldiers who consequently conduct themselves with virtual impunity, and who often come from other parts of Burma and are without connections to the local community.

Whatever the underlying reasons, four main categories of human rights violations are regularly committed by army battalions on the southern peninsula, including:

a. Interrogation, assault and summary execution. Villagers are commonly interrogated on the whereabouts and activities of insurgents. Frequent violence is ostensibly a part of the information gathering process, but it is also deliberately used to intimidate villagers into compliance. Civilians are also executed summarily, sometimes for being suspected

rebel supporters or sometimes simply for working or traveling in a “black area,” dubbed to be under rebel control and, consequently, a free fire zone. In other cases, villagers are punished after clashes with rebels. On February 19th, for instance, the Independent Mon News Agency reported that soldiers from Infantry Battalion No. 31 executed two youth near Pauk-pin-kwin village, Yebyu Township, Tenasserim Division after a soldier was wounded by a landmine laid by Mon rebels.

b. Travel restrictions, forced relocation and surveillance. SPDC battalions working to pacify particular areas sometimes relocate households and even entire villages. Any people seen in the cleared areas are subsequently assumed to be rebels or supporters and shot on sight. Residents of areas experiencing insurgent activity are also frequently placed on 6pm to 6am or 24 hour curfews. Designed to consolidate control of an area, the restrictions serve to severely undermine agricultural activities because farms sometimes lie far away from villages, must be guarded at night or must be tended at dawn before the heat of the day.

c. Punitive taxation, quotas, land seizure and looting. Mon State and Karen States and Tenasserim Division are home to high concentrations of SPDC army battalions. Battalions are encouraged to be “self reliant” by Burma’s central government, which functionally gives them free reign to extract resources from local residents. Agricultural products and livestock are frequently commandeered or simply stolen at night. Taxes and fees for basic services and permission are also common. Seizure of plantations and homes for army barracks or fund-raising is common as well. Insurgent groups also tax local residents. The Nai Chan Dein group has been particularly active since the close of the 2008 rainy season; in the last three months alone, at least 5 villages in an area of northern Tenasserim Division have each been ordered to pay his group 5 to 7 million kyat.

d. Forced labor, including conscription of porters and human minesweepers for military operations. Residents are frequently called upon to work as unpaid laborers on projects like road repairs or building and maintaining army barracks. During SPDC offensives or patrols villagers are also conscripted as porters and made to carry munitions and other supplies. Residents are also sometimes required to stand nightly or 24-hour sentry duty along the gas pipelines or outside villages.

In addition to the human rights consequences of these continued abuses, the economic effects should not be understated. Interview subjects often explain the impact of abuses not in terms of the violations of their “rights” as such but as making it difficult or impossible to earn a livelihood and support families. For villagers already struggling in a country with stagnate economy, the added strain of paying arbitrary and unpredictable taxes, losing products and possessions to commandeering, and workdays made impossible by travel restrictions or sentry duty, is too much. The combined effect of direct fear of violence and the indirect, cumulative impacts on livelihood, cause many villagers to seek safety in the resettlement sites along the border.

B. Resettlement sites and “returned refugees”

Prior to the 1995 cease-fire, Mon refugees were often able to find refuge



Returned refugees at the Halockhani in late 1996.



Halockhani site circa 1994 (photo courtesy of KHRG)

in camps inside Thailand. In 1989-1990 Burmese troops attacked and overran Three Pagodas Pass, the main area controlled by the NMSP along the Thai border. According to figures from the Mon National Relief Committee [MNRC, renamed the Mon Relief and Development Committee – “MRDC” – in 2000], over 12,000 civilians then fled to Thailand and several Mon refugee camps were set up in Thailand’s Sangkhlaburi District of Kanchanaburi Province. Starting in 1992, as part of its ‘constructive

engagement’ deal with the State Law and Order Restoration Council (SORC, the SPDC’s different-in-name-only predecessor), the Thai government began pushing Mon refugees back into SORC territory. All Mon refugees were first ordered to move to one site at Loh Loe, west of Sangkhlaburi Town. This site was only allowed to exist for another year, however, and at the beginning of 1994 Thai authorities ordered the people, now referred to as “returned refugees” to move to a new site at Halockhani village in Mon State.

More Mon refugees were returned to Burma in 1996 after the NMSP ceasefire in June 1995. Most refugees did not return to their places of origin, however, and took temporary residence at the Halockhani, Bee Ree and Tavoy resettlement sites. Over a decade later, at least 10,000 people continue to live at these sites. These resettlement sites are in fact clusters of villages, and often resemble the home villages of the returned refugees except for the fact that their population densities are high and huts clustered unusually close together. According to the MRDC, the Halockhani site, founded in 1994, includes Baleh Hani, Kyaik-soi-Mon, Baleh-donephai, Htee-wa-doe, Kyaone-kwee and Che-daik villages, although the area between and including Baleh Hani and Kyaik-soi-Mon villages is often referred to locally as Halockhani. The Bee Ree site, founded in 1996, includes Jo-haprao, Pnan-peung, Suwanaphoom and Burk Surk villages. The Tavoy site, also founded in 1996, includes Meip-zeip, Krone-baing, Jao-done, Weng-naike and Tor-lawi villages. According to MRDC figures from January 2009, these sites are home to 3,896 people, 3,265 and 2,226 people respectively. The official MRDC numbers are without question lower than the actual population and include only those who receive aid from the organization. Not reflected, then, are children under 5, “dispersed families” who reside in the camps for shorter spans of time and new arrivals. “Most arrival families are not registered by the MRDC [so they receive no support],” says Nai Chan Kohn, an administrator at the Baleh Hani site. “We receive new families from other places because of armed conflict in the deep south of Mon State. When I go to Kyait Soi Mon village, ever month I find at least 3 or 4 new families building their huts.”

III. Returned refugees livelihoods

A. MRDC support and “self reliance”

The United Nations Refugee Agency (UNHCR), the Thai government and other major international aid agencies do not recognize the Halockhani, Bee Ree and Tavoy resettlement sites. External support for food, shelter, health, education and other social services is, subsequently, very limited. Support primarily comes from the MRDC, though limited support also comes from a few other international non-governmental organizations.

Until 2000, support included 12 monthly disbursements of 15 kilograms “tins” of rice for each person more than 5 years of age. From 2000 to 2004 this was reduced to 8 disbursements per year. From 2005 to 2006 it went down to 6, in 2007 it was 5 and 2008 it was 4. According to the MRDC, 2009 will see rice distributed just 3 times. “We had a golden era of Halockhani in the past... We got assistance from many humanitarian agencies like MSF [Médecins sans Frontières – France] for health care and other donors like MRDC. At that time we got full assistance in both food



Rice rations being distributed by the MRDC at Che Daik village

and shelter. And other assistance like health care and also there were a lot of job opportunities for people who lived in this village,” described Nai Seik, 45, who has lived between Baleh Hani and Kyaik Soi Mon villages in Halockhani for over a decade. “If we can get enough rice, we can survive. But unluckily, I heard from the MRDC that they will only distribute rice 3 times this year. This is bad news for us.”

The primary reason for the reduction in support from the MRDC is because of declining support from international donors. Accompanying the reduction in rice rations has been increasing encouragement for “self reliance” on the part of site residents. Starting in 2007, the MRDC began quarterly home garden “backyard husbandry” trainings. The MRDC is also providing agricultural tools and, 6 times annually, sets of seeds for 5 different times of garden vegetables.

In spite of assistance from the MRDC, residents of the 3 resettlement sites covered in this report are struggling to handle the reduction in rice rations and become self reliant. This is primarily a function of geography; the villages that make up the resettlement signs are remote and difficult to access, especially during the rainy season. Residents consequently have few outside opportunities for employment, as well as limited access to crucial small-scale sale opportunities. Relatedly, the concentration of households in relatively small areas means there is limited space for agricultural projects. Residents are reluctant to range farther than the immediate vicinity of the village sites, meanwhile, because of security concerns related to the presence of SPDC army battalions and rebel armed groups.

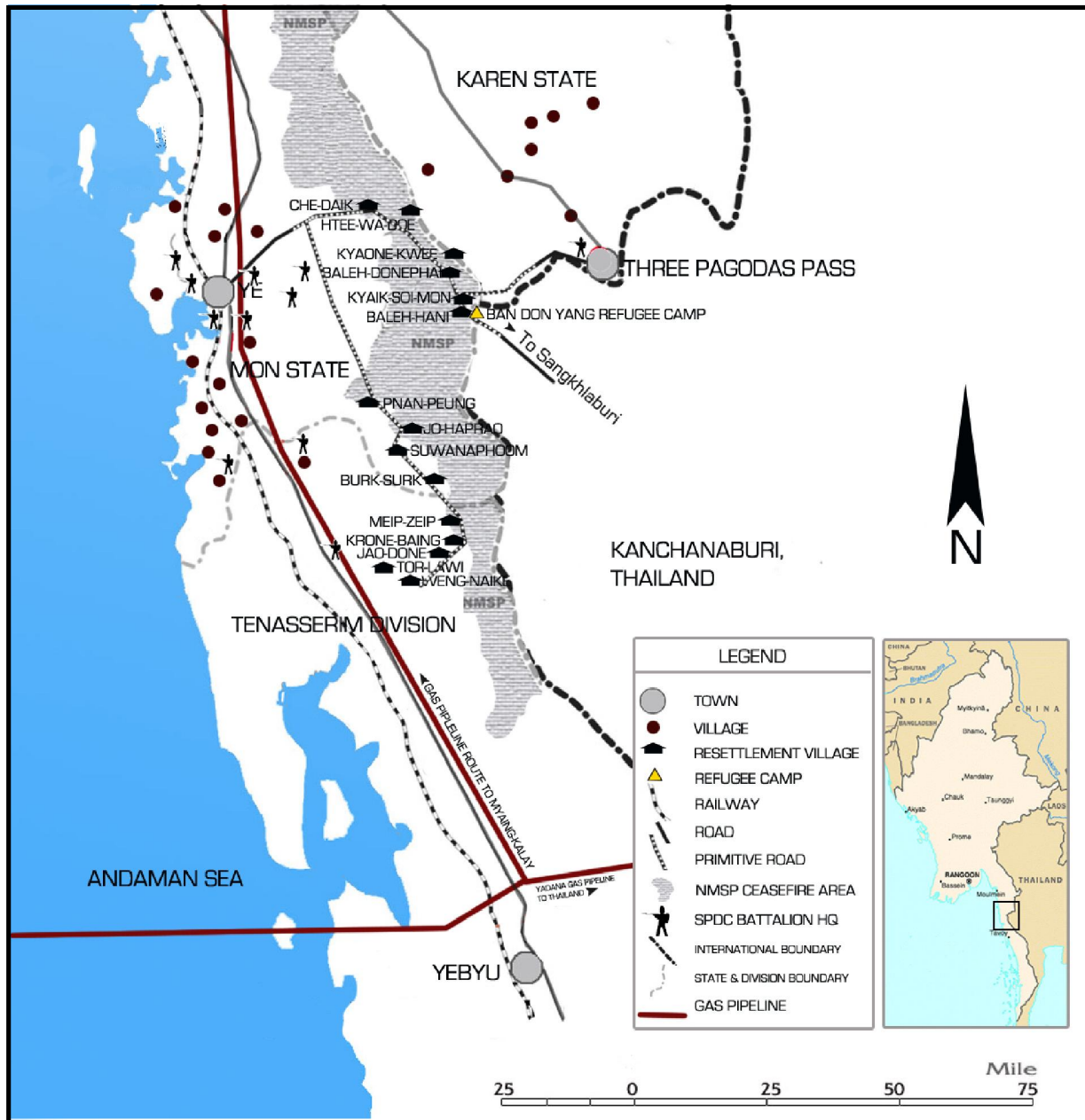
B. Factors under-mining self reliance

1. Limited space for agriculture

That the MRDC encourages site residents to be “self-sufficient” is vital, as one interview subject said, because external support is not guaranteed. Space concerns have, however, presented major problems.

Mi Htaw, 26, Jo-haprao village, Bee Ree resettlement site:

“In order to launch self-reliance activities, people are focusing on agriculture. A lot of people face space problems. Sometimes they have conflict with each other because there is not enough room. The major problem is that only some people can earn only a very small income. The rest have no job at all... When we look at each household in this area, the



Map of resettlement sites in NMSP controlled areas near the Thai Burma border

income and the expenditures are not balanced. The need is always happening. If MRDC does not provide enough food in this area, I can tell that many of the people in this area will have big problems in the coming year.”

Even long-time, established site residents struggle to find space for farming, throwing into relief the problems had by newly arrived residents.

Nai Seik, 45, between Baleh Hani and Kyaik Soi Mon villages, Halockhani resettlement site:

“Right now I am growing some vegetables close to the stream because I have lived here a long time and have some land. But it is a very small garden. If we can get enough rice, we can survive... We received rice in January 2009 [but will only receive 2 more disbursements this year]. We got one tin per person. Right now we can still survive but I don’t know for the future. Now I remind my children not to get sick and to take care of their health. Because if we are not healthy we will have a big problem.”

The reduction in MRDC aid will be felt particularly acutely in 2009 because of the weakness of the recent paddy harvest:

Nai Blu, Bee Ree resettlement site:

“Most people are trying to farm. That’s why we have very limited land around the village. But last year [the 2008 rainy season crop, harvested at the end of the year], people could only produce 50% or 40% of the paddy they expected from the land – because of late rain and attacks by insects and wild animals. And disease in the paddy. And also during harvest time, the rain did not stop. During the harvest time people lost a lot of paddy. For my household, I could only produce 40 tins of paddy. Compared with previous years, we could produce 80 to 90 tins. Last year was even not enough, but combined with the MRDC supply we could survive. But this year I do not think we will have enough food.”

2. Security

In better circumstances, site residents would not live so close together and would be able to spread out or travel to agricultural projects farther from the village sites. Security concerns, however, mean that villagers are reluctant to travel very far away. Though the NMSP remains faithful to its 1995 ceasefire, armed members of the KNU’s Karen National Liberation Army 4th Brigade and small Mon armed groups like the MRP and Nai Chan Dein group remain active. SPDC army troops, meanwhile,



SPDC soldiers conducting an operation near an NMSP controlled area in Tavoy district

continue patrols in the areas, even entering into the villages. Villagers that encounter armed groups outside the sites risk being questioned about the whereabouts of adversaries, taxed or conscripted as porters. Residents also fear landmines, which have been placed by both SPDC army and rebel soldiers alike. According to a 2008 report by the International Campaign to Ban Landmines, anti-personnel mines continue to be used by both the SPDC and rebel groups; according to a 2004 report by the same group, Burma has one of the highest landmine casualty rates in the world.

Nai Chit, 47, Baleh Hani village, Halockhani resettlement site:

“People are really concerned about unforeseen dangers. For example, landmines and kidnapping by [rebel] armed groups and the most dangerous, the SPDC troops. Because of these security challenges, people do not want to go far from the resettlement sites for agriculture. I think the donors do not really know the situation in detail. Because of the landmines, at least 10 persons lost parts of their bodies. At least 5 people died because they stepped on the landmines. That’s why people are so concerned about their safety. Most people want to farm close around the resettlement site. So space is limited.

Nai Seik, 45, between Baleh Hani and Kyaik Soi Mon villages, Halockhani resettlement site:

“It was not very hard to look for [wild] vegetables [referring to when he first moved to Halockhani in 1995/1996]. You could walk for 2 minutes and find vegetables to eat. At that time, the surrounding area was full of forest and bamboo. But some people plant farms in the hills but not many because people had enough food from the international aid groups... Now the forests are gone and the rains are heavier and the hot season is hotter. The situation started getting worse and worse in 2003, 2004. It was a very bad situation in

2006. We have faced a lot of armed conflict. Because of that people have a lack of security. We lost the confidence to go to our farms.”

Some site residents are also highly concerned with the status of the NMSP-SPDC ceasefire. The NMSP has come under increasing pressure to participate in the SPDC's 2010 elections as well transform the MNLA into a government-affiliated border patrol force. The group recently refused on both fronts.

Mi Htaw, 26, Jo-haprao village, Bee Ree resettlement site:

“We hear a lot of rumors about security related to the current political situation in southern Burma. As we know, this area is totally controlled by the NMSP. If something happens between the NMSP and the Burmese government, all these people are automatically affected. Most households are waiting for the NMSP to show a [warning] light and the people will run away.”

Nai Nee, 40, Pnan-peung village, Bee Ree resettlement site:

“As you know, we have to rely on the New Mon State Party in this area. [The NMSP] is like our mother. We don't want them to fight with the Burmese government again. If fighting happens again, we will have to run another time. Because of fighting in the past, we lost a lot of people who we loved. We don't want to face this kind of situation again. We really want to be in a safe place. Pnan-peung is totally controlled by the [NMSP], so I the situation is not so bad I think. But nobody can guess the future political situation.”

3. Few non-agricultural jobs

The relatively remote locations of the resettlement sites mean that residents have few economic opportunities outside of agriculture. Jobs that are available are typically short-term and seasonal, such as collecting bamboo shoots or tall grass for broom making. Wood and bamboo cutting as well as charcoal making were also common activities that have declined because of deforestation.

Mi Htaw, 26, Jo-haprao village, Bee Ree resettlement site:

“Geographically, this area has few opportunities for economic activity. No one can come and invest [in plantations, orchards, etc.] here. And this area is very isolated from the markets and business activities. When we look at the transportation route, it is very difficult to go from one place to another, especially during the rainy season. The communication is quite bad compared to other places. In order to launch self-reliance activities, people are focusing on agriculture. A lot of people face space problems. Sometimes they have conflict with each other because there is not enough room... Only some people can earn only a very small income. The rest have no job at all.”

Nai Seik, 45, between Baleh Hani and Kyaik Soi Mon villages, Halockhani resettlement site:

The forest and bamboo is gone – there is nothing left around the village because too many families are trying to produce charcoal from the forest and people are trying to earn money by cutting bamboo... They encourage us to launch self-reliance programs, but in order to be self-reliant we have to have job opportunities. In this village, there are more than 700 people living here. But only less than 10% have jobs, and these jobs are not consistent or regular. For other people, their job opportunities are only 3 times a year. Collecting tall grass in December and January. The second opportunity is collecting bamboo shoots [in June and July]. And some people produced charcoal, but only very few do that now... The places are very limited – nearly every household goes and collects the tall grass. So each household could only get 2 kilos a day, so they could just earn 50 baht a day. Also we have a lot of difficulty because people compete with each other to get as much as they can but

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Human Rights Foundation of Monland (HURFOM) was founded in 1995, by a group of young Mon people. The main objectives of HURFOM are:

- Monitoring the human rights situation in Mon territory and other areas in southern Burma
- Protecting and promoting internationally recognized human rights in Burma,

In order to implement these objectives, HURFOM produces the monthly "Mon Forum" newsletters. If publication is delayed it is because we are waiting to confirm information, and it comes with our heartfelt apologies.

We encourage you to write to us if you have feedback or if you know someone who you think would like to receive the newsletter. Please email or mail a name and address to:

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With regards,

Director
Human Rights Foundation of Monland

the space is very limited. Sometimes we have to go 3 miles away to get to a place for collecting grass."

Kon Gyi, 60, Baleh Done Phai village, Halockhani resettlement site:

"Right now I have no job. Two months ago I had work collecting tall grass for brooms. But we do not make the brooms, we just sell the raw tall grass. Me and two of my kids were working on that... We have to be very careful with this income until the bamboo shoot season [in June and July]... This summer season, there is only one job but it is not regular work. I have to find a person who cuts timber and wood in the Karen villages and be a saw-man... If me and my sons can find these jobs, we can still survive... If we have no work as saw men, I do not know how we will survive this summer."

Mi Tin Myint, 56, Che-daik village, Bee Ree resettlement site:

"Job opportunities are rarer and rarer. People have very few places to work around the village. The only job people have is relying on collecting tall grasses and producing very small businesses like charcoal and collecting bamboo shoots in the rainy season. Even these job opportunities are very limited every year. And the place to get those products right now are very far from the camps. Most people try farm hillside paddy farms, so there is no more land left around the villages."



An older woman collecting tall grass for brooms near Che Daik village

IV. Conclusion

The reduction in MRDC rice support for residents of the Halockhani, Bee Ree and Tavoy resettlement sites is causing serious concern among residents. Encouraging "self reliance" is undoubtedly important, as a goal and as a matter of necessity driven by declining

donor support. But interview subjects also highlighted very real obstacles to full self-sufficiency. Remote geographic locations, primitive roads and limited access to outside markets make economic opportunities few. Space and security concerns, meanwhile, make local agricultural projects necessarily small-scale.



Residents of the Tavoy resettlement site collecting bamboo

It should be said, however, that some residents criticized neighbors for perceived reliance on MRDC support.

Nai Acho, 55, Tor-lawi village, Tavoy resettlement site:

“My opinion is that because people used to receive lots of support and assistance from many donors, they have a kind of habit to continue wanting support... When the donor tries to reduce support to that area, some people try to criticize the donors for reducing support. In reality, also the NMSP... knows that one day the donors will reduce their supplies. But people are too concerned for their security... For me I like the donor’s self-reliance programs. I do not accuse the people of being lazy. But they do not trust agriculture.”

Capable of self-reliance or not, residents of the resettlement sites are not there by choice or preference. And for many, once original villages have been departed there is no going back. Land is seized on their absence, government family lists are updated and dangerous suspicions raised upon any return. “Now they are refugees. Their situation changed a lot, like magic. This is the result of the armed conflict,” explained Nai Chan Kohn, the administrator from the Baleh Hani site, after describing a relatively wealthy family who fled following the seizure of their plantation by the SPDC. “That’s why they are here. That’s why they have only a one-way ticket – they have no way to go back. They live here not because they are satisfied with the situation here, but because they want to avoid the fighting.”

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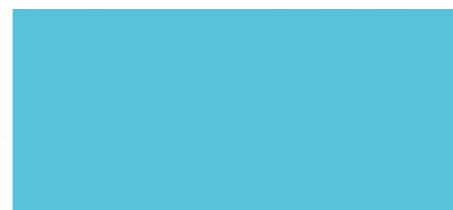
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