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**Advisory Panel on the Question of
South America (APQSA)**

*The question of illicit drug trafficking
among Latin American Cartels*

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Forum: Advisory Panel on the Question of Latin America (APQLA?)

Issue: The question of illicit drug trafficking among Latin American Cartels

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Introduction

A drug cartel is an independent criminal organization formed to serve as the supplier for drug trafficking organizations. Internationally branched out cartels control every aspect of the illegal drug industry, as they have access to the raw materials for production, they are equipped with the necessary amount of firearms for combat and they usually get away with their activities without dealing with any sort of resistance from law enforcement. Their activities are very profitable, and they finance their drug trafficking through various crimes such as human and sex trafficking. These drug cartels are predominantly based in Latin America and they cause a lot of problems for the nations in the aforementioned region. They take advantage of the sharp divide between the rich and the poor, as the harsh rural living conditions leave the residents no other choice but to join these criminal organizations. As drug cartels are the only way that the lower class in Latin America can make sufficient enough money for survival. To make matters worse, corruption amongst law enforcement has made it impossible for nations to curb the power of organized crime in Latin America. The Latin American region is seeking much-needed peace and stability, and to achieve this ultimate goal experts will need to come up with solutions to curb the power of organized crime while dealing with social and political polarization. This report will explain the situation in Latin America and serve as a guide for experts to come up with solutions.



(figure 1: The Map of Latin America, labeled)

Definition of Key Terms

Drug Cartel: Any criminal organization with the intention of conducting drug trafficking operations.

Smuggling: The illegal transportation of goods, information and other entities.

Drug Lord: Usually a high ranked individual who controls the majority of the drug trafficking network of a cartel.

Harvesting: The activity of collecting crops from the fields

Trafficking: The usage of force and intimidation to obtain a form of return that would benefit the trafficker; types include Human and Sex Trafficking. Latin American drug cartels finance their activities through trafficking practices¹

Homicide: Homicide is a generalization of legal and illegal killings, it is the killing of one person through another.

Transnational Criminal Organizations: Transnational Criminal Organizations are groups that are responsible for the transportation of illegal goods across borders, cartels can be classified as Transnational Criminal Organizations.

General Overview

How does a drug cartel work?

¹ "Trafficking in Women and Girls and the Fight to End it - Americas" 26 Nov. 2014, <https://www.americas.org/trafficking-in-women-and-girls-and-the-fight-to-end-it/>. Accessed 26 Jan. 2022.

A strong drug cartel controls every aspect of the illegal drug industry and cartels that can carry out their activities consistently have grown stronger financially every year. The drug cartels are much stronger than people think they are, according to the Global Financial Integrity's report "Transnational Crime and the Developing World"² in 2014, the estimated size of the illicit drug trading market was between 426-625 trillion USD (United States Dollars). Being a competitive figure in this market is very profitable and cartels take advantage of different situations to fully maximize their financial potential.

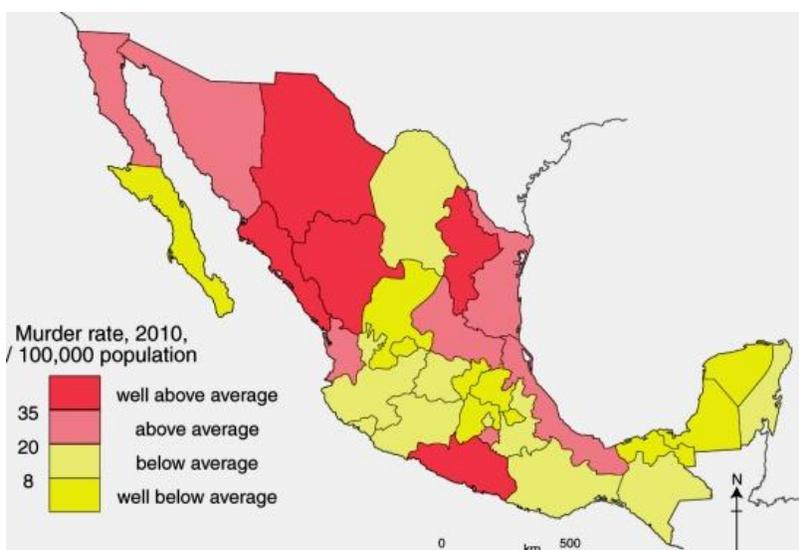
Analyzing these situations within the context of the supply chain of a drug would make it easier to understand. A great example would be cocaine since it is one of the most profitable drugs for cartels. The first step in this chain is obtaining the raw materials, which in this case would be the coca seed. The Latin American region usually has a very humid climate, thus this makes certain countries such as Bolivia, Chile, Peru, and Colombia ideal for coca seed farming. The cartels certainly take advantage of these circumstances. According to Tom Wainwright, a columnist responsible for the Latin American³ region on The Economist, local cartels such as the Zetas Cartel (Mexico) and the Black Eagles (Colombia) have ties with local criminals. These local criminals would oversee the farming and would do the local drug dealing, in addition to this they would be armed by the cartels. As the local support for these organizations grew, the cartels grew rapidly. As mentioned before in the introduction section, the socioeconomic divide in countries is the main reason why the lower class in Latin American countries revert to crime

Corruption and their relationship with cartels

Cartels grow rapidly because the lower class in Latin America basically have no other choice but to join these organizations to keep their head above water. In addition to this, the drug cartels grow rapidly because the political environment allows them to do so. The Latin American region is synonymous with political instability and corruption. Major countries that are dealing with cartels also are the countries that have alarmingly high corruption, Mexico would be a good example. According to the Corruption Perceptions Index, Mexico ranked 130th out of 180 countries in 2019. The political instability in the past has hurt their ability to take effective measures in battling these cartels. The various regimes of the Institutionalized Revolution Party (PRI) have shown authoritarian and anti-democratic tendencies, which turned Mexico into a one-party state for 71 years.

² "Transnational Crime and the Developing World - Global Financial" 27 Mar. 2017, <https://gfindtegrity.org/report/transnational-crime-and-the-developing-world/>. Accessed 27 Jan. 2022.

³ "'Narconomics': How The Drug Cartels Operate Like Wal-Mart And" 15 Feb. 2016, <https://www.npr.org/transcripts/466491812>. Accessed 27 Jan. 2022.



(Figure 2, Homicide rates in Mexico, 2010)

One-party states usually have an authoritarian hold over the country, thus they use bureaucracy for their own personal gain. This has led to very weak internal security, as homicide rates in Mexico grew year by year at an uncontrollable rate. As seen in figure 2, the highest homicide rates in Mexico are in states that have a border to the United States. A country known for dealing with drug cartels and has high drug smuggling rates has very weak border security. As mentioned previously in the report, the demand for drugs is not confined locally, the fact that countries like Mexico, Guatemala, and Colombia share a border with the most competitive “illicit substance” market in the world (United States of America) make borders all the more critical for drug cartels. The borders serve these cartels as checkpoints and passageways for profit. Over the years, cartels such as the Tijuana cartel (Mexico) and the Medellín⁴ have built their base of operations in border areas, as it was and still is crucial for their activities. To deal with the cartels, governments usually reverted to military combat. However, the mishandling and aggression have led to catastrophic results -more on that in the “Evaluation of Previous attempts Section”.

Major Parties Involved and Their Views

Mexico: Mexico is the country that has suffered the most from cartels in the Americas, as the strongest cartels such as the Sinaloa Cartel⁵, The Jalisco New Generation Cartel⁶ are based in Mexico. The jarring socioeconomic divide between the upper and lower classes of Mexico is very evident. According to the International Fund of Agricultural Development (IFAD), the poverty rate in rural areas is at a staggering

⁴ "DRUG MARKET TRENDS: COCAINE AMPHETAMINE." 30 Jun. 2021, https://www.unodc.org/res/wdr2021/field/WDR21_Booklet_4.pdf. Accessed 29 Jan. 2022.

⁵ "Sinaloa Cartel - InSight Crime." 4 May. 2021, <https://insightcrime.org/mexico-organized-crime-news/sinaloa-cartel-profile/>. Accessed 26 Jan. 2022.

⁶ "Jalisco Cartel New Generation (CJNG) - InSight Crime." <https://insightcrime.org/mexico-organized-crime-news/jalisco-cartel/>. Accessed 26 Jan. 2022.

40.8% and extreme poverty is at 17%⁷. Widespread rural poverty is a huge problem in Mexico, as people living under extreme poverty join the regional drug cartels as they benefit from it more financially rather than looking for a job within the Mexican system. Also, Mexico is the only country in the Latin American region to fully engage in military combat against Drug Cartels. From 2006 to 2019, Mexico with help from the United States engaged in the “Drug War” to mixed results. Although the war is over, it doesn’t mean that the Cartels don’t exist anymore, major steps are required to battle the socioeconomic inequality amongst the Mexican people to avoid another long term conflict with the Cartels



(Figure 3: Cartels in Mexico, Labeled)

The United States of America: Mexican drug cartels serve as the main suppliers of illegal drugs to the United States. In addition to this, the cartels use the Mexican-American borders as a primary route for smuggling. Since the start of the war against drug cartels, the United States has provided Mexico with financial and military aid, this has helped Mexico track down and arrest powerful drug lords such as Joaquin Guzman⁸ (the leader of the Sinaloa Cartel).

Colombia: The Latin American climate is a perfect environment for raw materials used in the production of drugs to grow. As the Equatorial Climate allows for certain plants such as the coca seed and the coca plant (both of which are very crucial materials for the production of cocaine) to be grown and harvested. Colombia happens to be one of the only places where coca plant farming is legal, and naturally, Colombia is a prime destination to purchase the necessary goods for cocaine production. Rafael Guarin, Colombia’s Presidential Advisor for National Security told Reuters in an interview that “The Mexicans are the

⁷ "Investing in rural people in Mexico - International Fund for"
http://www.ifad.org/documents/38714170/39972349/mexico_e.pdf/458074c3-ed5a-4675-979c-a2535ec5477b. Accessed 26 Jan. 2022.

⁸ "Joaquín Guzmán-López - United States Department of State." 16 Dec. 2021,
<https://www.state.gov/narcotics-rewards-program-target-information-wanted/joaquin-guzman-lopez/>. Accessed 26 Jan. 2022.

principal buyers of the Coca produced in Colombia”, he also implied that the Cartels based in Mexico are the rulers of the drug industry in Latin America.⁹

Bolivia: Bolivia could be considered the “cocaine farm” for many drug cartels. Just like Colombia, the humid nature of Bolivia makes it perfect for the necessary materials needed to produce cocaine to grow. Just like Colombia, the commercial usage of coca is legal. In the late 1980s, the Colombian Cartel “Medellin” gained prominent power in Bolivia and had prominent influence over coca farms and the local criminals. Bolivia gained the name “Narco-State” when in 1980, the military junta headed by Luis Garcia Tejada¹⁰executed a coup d’etat. After the Garcia regime came to power, narcotics related corruption spreaded out to all levels of bureaucracy. With top members of his cabinet (Colonel Ariel Coca, Luiz Gomez) known for being top names in the illicit drug trading industry.¹¹ Different attempts have been made to solve illicit drug trading in Bolivia, to mixed results. More on that in the “Evaluation of Previous Attempts in Solving the issue” section.

Timeline of Events

1978	The first of the two “Cocaine Coups” occur in Honduras, as the military junta lead by Palicarpo Garcia formed a new government
1980	The second “Cocaine Coup” happens in Bolivia, as Luis Garcia Tejada formed a new government via a violent military coup, during his regime narcotics-related corruption became more and more frequent.
1988	“The Vienna Convention Against Illicit Traffic in Narcotic Drugs and Psychotropic Substances” ¹² was signed

⁹ "Four Mexican drug cartels top buyers and traffickers of Colombian" 22 Oct. 2020, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-colombia-mexico-drugs/four-mexican-drug-cartels-top-buyers-and-traffickers-of-colombian-cocaine-official-says-idUSKBN2772G6>. Accessed 26 Jan. 2022.

¹⁰ "Luis García Meza, Bolivian Dictator Jailed for Genocide, Dies at 88." 2 May. 2018, <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/05/02/obituaries/luis-garcia-meza-bolivian-dictator-jailed-for-genocide-dies-at-88.html>. Accessed 29 Jan. 2022.

¹¹ "Soldiers, Peasants, Politicians and the War on Drugs in Bolivia." <https://digitalcommons.wcl.american.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1550&context=auilr&httpsredir=1&referer=>. Accessed 29 Jan. 2022.

¹² "Convention against the Illicit Traffic in Narcotic Drugs and - UNODC." <https://www.unodc.org/unodc/en/treaties/illicit-trafficking.html?ref=menuaside>. Accessed 29 Jan. 2022.

1993	Pablo Escobar ¹³ , the leader of the Medellin Cartel ¹⁴ was killed, this put an effective end to the Medellin Cartel
2000	Cocaine production peaks in Colombia
2006	Newly elected president of Mexico, Felipe Calderon officially starts the “Drug War” ¹⁵¹⁶¹⁷ by sending troops to Michoacan.
2014	One of the most powerful drug lords since Pablo Escobar, Joaquin Guzman (Leader of the Sinaloa Cartel) was arrested
2015	Joaquin Guzman escapes prison for the second time, the lack of security calls the law enforcements transparency into question.
2018	A leftist politician, Luis Obrador comes to power as the new president of Mexico
2018	A key member of the Zetas Cartel (A cartel that has prominent power in Bolivia and Colombia) was arrested
2019	President of Mexico, Luis Obrador declares the end of the drug war, starting a recovery period in Mexico and the Latin American region as a whole

Treaties and Events

([A/RES/74/178](#)): This resolution calls upon the International Community to recognize drug trafficking as a major problem, not necessarily related to the Mexican War)

¹³ "Pablo Escobar | Biography, Death, & Facts | Britannica." 1 Jan. 2022, <https://www.britannica.com/biography/Pablo-Escobar>. Accessed 29 Jan. 2022.

¹⁴ "How The Medellín Cartel Became The Most Ruthless In History." 28 Sep. 2021, <https://allthatsinteresting.com/medellin-cartel>. Accessed 29 Jan. 2022.

¹⁵ "A History of the Drug War | Drug Policy Alliance." 15 Sep. 2016, <https://drugpolicy.org/issues/brief-history-drug-war>. Accessed 29 Jan. 2022.

¹⁶ "Mexico Drug War Fast Facts | CNN." 12 Apr. 2021, <https://www.cnn.com/2013/09/02/world/americas/mexico-drug-war-fast-facts/index.html>. Accessed 29 Jan. 2022.

¹⁷ "Mexico's Long War: Drugs, Crime, and the Cartels - Council on" 26 Feb. 2021, <https://www.cfr.org/backgrounder/mexicos-long-war-drugs-crime-and-cartels>. Accessed 29 Jan. 2022.

(Resolution 59/6 (CND)): This resolution promotes prevention and recovery strategies.

(Resolution 59/7 (CND)): This resolution is about proportional sentencing regarding drug-related offences and appropriate methods to implement drug control policies.

The Cato Accord: Bolivia's Humane and Effective Approach to Control Coca Cultivation (A detailed analysis of the Cato accord can be found in the footnote at the end of the page)¹⁸

The Vienna Convention Against Illicit Traffic in Narcotic Drugs and Psychotropic Substances¹⁹: UNODC's convention about narcotic drug trafficking.

Evaluation of Previous Attempts to Resolve the Issue

There have been many attempts to curb the power of organized crime in Latin America, countries like Mexico have chosen direct combat against cartels. While countries such as Bolivia and Guatemala have chosen diplomacy to solve the issue at hand. The most notable attempt came by Mexico, their policies during the "Drug War" demonstrated the Do's and Don'ts while fighting nationwide crime. Since Calderon's administration took office, Mexico has deployed more than 45,000 soldiers²⁰. The aim of the all-out military attack was to ensure public safety and end the threat of cartels once and for all, however, the government failed to ensure safety as the cartels couldn't be stopped. Across the two regimes that ruled (Calderon and Pena Nieto), the drug war had a major adverse effect on human rights. The military was given all the power to conduct operations whenever and wherever they pleased. Various operations were met by a heavy backlash by the international community. Frequent operations were conducted at Southern Mexican states, and it was very common to see violations of human rights such as confiscation of evidence, illegal arrest, rape, and torture.^{21,22} Due to the corrupt legislative and executive system in Mexico,²³ the law enforcements were not held accountable for their human rights violations. In addition

¹⁸ "The Cato Accord: Bolivia's Humane and Effective Approach to"
<https://ain-bolivia.org/wp-content/uploads/The-Cato-Accord-Bolivias-Humane-and-Effective-Approach-to-Controlling-Coca-Cultivation.pdf>. Accessed 29 Jan. 2022.

¹⁹ "Convention against the Illicit Traffic in Narcotic Drugs and - UNODC."
<https://www.unodc.org/unodc/en/treaties/illicit-trafficking.html?ref=menuaside>. Accessed 29 Jan. 2022.

²⁰ "Mexico Drug War Fast Facts | CNN." 12 Apr. 2021,
<https://www.cnn.com/2013/09/02/world/americas/mexico-drug-war-fast-facts/index.html>. Accessed 30 Jan. 2022.

²¹ "World Report 2021: Mexico | Human Rights Watch."
<https://www.hrw.org/world-report/2021/country-chapters/mexico>. Accessed 30 Jan. 2022.

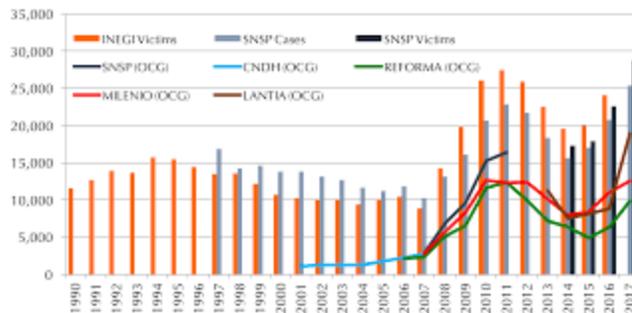
²² "Mexico | Country Page | World | Human Rights Watch." <https://www.hrw.org/americas/mexico>. Accessed 30 Jan. 2022.

²³ "Bribery & Corruption Laws and Regulations | Mexico - Global Legal"
<https://www.globallegalinsights.com/practice-areas/bribery-and-corruption-laws-and-regulations/mexico>. Accessed 30 Jan. 2022.

to this, the unit responsible to cover the narcotics-related stories and tell the Mexican people the truth; the press was neglected. During the authoritarian PRI regime, the journalists that did not follow the agenda of the ruling party got sent to jail as political prisoners. During the transition power, the situation of the press did not get any better. As the government failed to protect the press against the looming threat of the cartels, between 2007 and 2019 close to 200 journalists have been killed²⁴. This failure of protecting the press has violated an integral part of Mexico's constitution; according to article 6 of the Mexican constitution, the press is tasked with delivering accurate and true information to the public.

*"The expression of ideas shall not be subjected to any judicial or administrative investigation, unless it offends good morals, infringes the rights of others, incites to crime or disturbs public order"*²⁵

After President Obrador came to power, things have seemed to calm down in Mexico. In January of 2019, he officially declared that the war against cartels was over. Ever since that announcement, Mexico entered a recovery period. The "Drug War" certainly proved that battling against organized crime with a corrupt political system would not work.



(Figure 4: Drug-related violence in Mexico, 2018)

To go back to the start of the "drug" supply chain, countries like Bolivia have decided to control the production of coca. Over the course of their history, the United States to this day is still a big partner of Bolivia regarding the fight against drug cartels and illicit substance trading. Around the 1980s, the United States and Bolivia partnered up to eradicate key supply lines of cocaine for drug cartels. According to a detailed report drafted by Dr. Thomas Grisaffi (published by the University College London) on the Cato Accord, the Americans even paid Bolivian farmers compensation for the lost production. The Cato Accord was signed and implemented to promote economic development in the coca farming regions while limiting the production of coca. The latter of which has shown moderate success, the UN survey on coca conducted in 2013 indicated that the coca cultivation in Bolivia stood at 23,000 hectares, a very

²⁴ "Lourdes Maldonado killing: Mexico's protection program fails to save" 27 Jan. 2022, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/2022/01/27/mexico-journalist-lourdes-maldonado-killed/>. Accessed 30 Jan. 2022.

²⁵ "Mexico's Constitution of 1917 with Amendments through 2015." https://www.constituteproject.org/constitution/Mexico_2015.pdf?lang=en. Accessed 30 Jan. 2022.

sharp decline from previous years²⁶. The main drawback to the Cato Accord was the economic repercussions that the farmers faced with the limitation of coca, although in the early stages the United States was providing them with financial aid, the net safety that the Cato Accord provided (The minimum wage of 260 dollars) is not enough for coca farmers to cover their losses.

Another country that benefited from the help of the United States was Colombia, as they signed an extradition treaty in November of 1979. This meant that any drug lords captured could be deported to the United States for their trials to be conducted there, this was a very smart move as the cartels did not have much power in the United States and in case of a capture, they would have been locked away for a very long time. This especially delivered a big blow to the Medellin Cartel, as it led to many high profile members being pushed out of Colombia and even the capture of Pablo Escobar^{27 28}.

Possible Solutions

To find long term solutions, there are a few things that need to be kept in mind,

1) Militarization is not the answer

Given the contextual evidence of the Drug War in Mexico and the Guerilla war in Colombia, it can be comfortably observed that the governments suffer the consequences of unplanned war. In addition to this, bureaucratically the war against drug cartels in Latin America is over, so restarting 2006 all over again would be foolish to put it in polite terms. President Obrador's current policies should set an example for all Latin American countries dealing with organized crime, since solving social inequality requires focusing on the social disparity that is present.

2) Education is very critical

The threat of drug cartels has been looming over Latin American society for generations now. The seeming lack of a stable education system has caused many people to join cartels. It is very apparent that education systems in Latin American countries are very flawed, the system is not as inclusive as one would hope. This is very important because the Latin American countries are home to many indigenous communities that are targeted by the cartels²⁹. To tie this to the lack of education, according to a report written by the Research and Development Corporation the key issue of the Mexican education (which is

²⁶ "The Cato Accord: Bolivia's Humane and Effective Approach to" <https://ain-bolivia.org/wp-content/uploads/The-Cato-Accord-Bolivias-Humane-and-Effective-Approach-to-Controlling-Coca-Cultivation.pdf>. Accessed 30 Jan. 2022.

²⁷ "extradition treaty with Colombia." https://web.oas.org/mla/en/Treaties_B/col_ext_usa_en.pdf. Accessed 30 Jan. 2022.

²⁸ "Pablo Escobar | Biography, Death, & Facts | Britannica." 1 Jan. 2022, <https://www.britannica.com/biography/Pablo-Escobar>. Accessed 30 Jan. 2022.

²⁹ "Indigenous Resistance to Criminal Governance: Why Regional" 10 Apr. 2019, <https://larriasa.org/articles/10.25222/larr.377/>. Accessed 30 Jan. 2022.

home to 68 indigenous groups) have very high dropout rates in the primary level in rural areas (areas in which indigenous people predominantly live in)³⁰ Also the past treatment by the Mexican government to indigenous people did help at all, as in 2001 nearly a third of the drug-related prisoners were from indigenous communities allegedly locked away due to drug-related crimes.³¹

Focusing on an inclusive education system is so crucial, every willing and able member of society can be a valuable contributor and turn away from drugs and crime. This is only possible with the incoming generation ushered in with an inclusive education system.

3) A very crucial building block: The Cato Accord

As mentioned in the previous section, The Cato Accord was a massive step in the right direction when it came to limiting coca production. As statistical values have proven that Bolivia had managed to take the necessary steps to limit coca cultivation to a susceptible rate. However, there are still some drawbacks to the accord, the minimum wage is simply not enough for farmers to cover their losses. Specifically in Bolivia, effective guarantees and incentives could be potentially on the table to stabilize an agriculture industry that was financially hit by the Cato Accord. After all, the Latin American region has a very profitable agriculture industry. For the Latin Americas as a whole, the Cato Accord should give a very good indication of how to break the supply chain of drugs. New agreements like this that benefit both the farmers and the government could be drafted to lay the groundwork efficient battle against the cartels in the long run.

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³⁰ "Education in Mexico: Challenges and Opportunities - RAND"
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³¹ "Violence, Insecurity and Disappearances in Mexico - Organization of"
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