



General Assembly (GA)

Safeguarding Access to

Education in Conflict

Zones

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I. INTRODUCTION

The General Assembly (GA) is the main deliberative, policymaking, and representative organ of the United Nations. Established in 1945 by the UN Charter, it is the only UN body in which all 193 Member States have equal representation, with each country entitled to one vote. The General Assembly meets annually in regular session from September to December and, when necessary, in special or emergency sessions. Its resolutions, while not legally binding on Member States, carry significant moral and political weight and shape global norms and international cooperation.

The Third Committee of the General Assembly, formally known as the Social, Humanitarian, and Cultural Committee (SOCHUM), focuses on a broad range of issues related to human rights, social development, and humanitarian affairs. Established as one of the six main committees of the General Assembly, SOCHUM is responsible for examining questions related to the promotion and protection of human rights, the right to self-determination, the rights of children, women's rights, the rights of indigenous peoples, and issues of racial discrimination and xenophobia. It receives reports from bodies such as the Human Rights Council, the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR), and various special rapporteurs, and passes resolutions that inform the work of the broader UN system.

The topic before this committee—Safeguarding Access to Education in Conflict Zones—sits at the intersection of human rights, humanitarian law, and sustainable development. Education is recognized as a fundamental human right under Article 26 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (1948) and is enshrined in the Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC, 1989), among other international instruments. Yet in areas affected by armed conflict, access to safe, continuous education is often one of the first casualties of war. Schools are destroyed, occupied by military forces, or deemed unsafe. Children are forced to flee their homes, teachers are displaced or threatened, and entire communities lose access to vital educational infrastructure.

The Third Committee provides the appropriate forum to address this crisis because education disruption in conflict zones is simultaneously a humanitarian emergency, a long-term

development challenge, and a human rights violation. Delegates in this committee will examine the legal frameworks designed to protect education during armed conflict, assess the scale of the global education crisis caused by conflict, evaluate the effectiveness of current international responses, and negotiate concrete solutions—ranging from digital learning platforms and mobile schooling to community partnerships and infrastructure rebuilding. The committee will also grapple with crosscutting themes such as gender equity in access to education, the protection of educators, and the longterm psychosocial needs of conflict-affected students.

Key terms for this debate include: armed conflict (both international and non-international), internally displaced persons (IDPs), the right to education, humanitarian access, Safe Schools Declaration, Education Cannot Wait (ECW), and the Sustainable Development Goal 4 (SDG 4), which calls for inclusive and equitable quality education for all by 2030.

II. History of the Problem

The relationship between armed conflict and the destruction of educational systems has deep historical roots. Throughout the twentieth century and into the present era, warfare has systematically targeted civilian infrastructure, including schools. Understanding this history is essential to crafting effective and durable international responses.

Early International Frameworks

The Hague Conventions of 1899 and 1907, among the earliest codifications of the laws of war, included provisions prohibiting the destruction of institutions dedicated to education, religion, and the arts. Despite these protections, World War I and World War II saw the widespread destruction of schools and universities across Europe, Africa, and Asia, demonstrating the gap between legal norms and battlefield realities.

Following World War II, the newly established United Nations developed the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (1948), Article 26 of which proclaimed education a fundamental human right. The 1949 Geneva Conventions further elaborated protections for civilians in war, including provisions for the education of children in occupied territories and internment camps (Fourth Geneva Convention, Articles 50, 94). The Additional Protocols of 1977 strengthened these protections, explicitly prohibiting attacks on objects indispensable to the survival of the civilian population.

Cold War Conflicts and Education

Throughout the Cold War, proxy conflicts in Southeast Asia, Central America, and Sub-Saharan

Africa inflicted severe damage on educational systems. In Cambodia, the Khmer Rouge regime (1975–1979) systematically destroyed schools, executed teachers, and banned formal education, resulting in the near-total collapse of the education sector. The Afghan civil wars beginning in the late 1970s and continuing through the Soviet occupation similarly devastated the country's schools, particularly those serving girls, a pattern that would be brutally reinforced under Taliban rule in the 1990s.

In Central America, the civil wars in El Salvador, Guatemala, and Nicaragua during the 1980s targeted rural schools as sites of literacy campaigns and community organizing. Teachers and students were killed, disappeared, or forced to flee. These experiences underscored the political dimensions of educational destruction: schools are targeted not only as collateral damage but sometimes deliberately, because education is seen as a vehicle for resistance or alternative political organization.

Post-Cold War Conflicts and the Rise of International Attention

The conflicts of the 1990s—in the former Yugoslavia, Rwanda, Sierra Leone, and Somalia—brought renewed attention to the protection of civilians, including children, in armed conflict. The 1996 Machel Report, commissioned by the UN Secretary-General and authored by Graça Machel, was a landmark document that systematically documented the impact of armed conflict on children, including the destruction of schools and the disruption of education. The report led directly to the appointment of the UN Special Representative of the Secretary-General for Children and Armed Conflict in 1997.

The Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989) had already established a comprehensive framework for the protection of children, including the right to education (Article 28) and the right to protection during armed conflict (Article 38). Its Optional Protocol on the Involvement of Children in Armed Conflict (2000) further strengthened these provisions. By the early 2000s, there was a growing international consensus that the education of children in conflict zones required specific, dedicated protection mechanisms.

The 21st Century: Escalating Crisis

The post-9/11 era saw a dramatic escalation of conflicts that affected millions of children's access to education. Wars in Afghanistan, Iraq, the Democratic Republic of Congo, Sudan, Somalia, and later Syria, Yemen, South Sudan, and the Sahel region created massive waves of displacement and school destruction. UNICEF data from the 2010s documented that more than 75 million children in conflict-affected countries were in need of educational assistance. Girls faced particular barriers, as conflict often reinforced pre-existing gender inequalities in

educational access, and groups such as Boko Haram in Nigeria explicitly targeted girls' schooling.

In 2015, the Safe Schools Declaration was endorsed by states meeting in Oslo, Norway, committing them to using the Inter-Agency Network for Education in Emergencies (INEE) Minimum Standards and the Guidelines for Protecting Schools and Universities from Military Use during Armed Conflict. As of 2024, over 115 states have endorsed the declaration, representing a significant advance in international norm-setting. That same year, the world adopted the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, with SDG 4 calling for inclusive and equitable quality education for all—an aspiration rendered nearly impossible for millions of children living in conflict zones.

III. Current Situation

The global education crisis in conflict zones has reached alarming proportions in the 2020s. According to the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) and UNICEF, as of 2023, approximately 222 million children and youth in crisis-affected countries are in need of educational support. Of these, an estimated 78.2 million are school-aged children who are entirely out of school due to conflict, displacement, or related insecurity. The following regions represent the most acute focal points.

Sub-Saharan Africa

Sub-Saharan Africa hosts the largest concentration of conflict-affected children out of school in the world. In the Sahel region alone—encompassing Mali, Burkina Faso, Niger, Chad, and parts of Nigeria—escalating jihadist violence has forced the closure of thousands of schools. In Burkina Faso, approximately 6,000 schools were closed as of early 2023, affecting nearly 1 million children. In the Democratic Republic of Congo, decades of conflict in the eastern provinces have created one of the world's largest protracted displacement crises, with millions of school-aged children unable to access consistent education. The Central African Republic, South Sudan, and Somalia similarly face severe education disruptions.

A particularly alarming trend is the deliberate targeting of schools by armed groups. In the Lake Chad Basin, Boko Haram and the Islamic State West Africa Province (ISWAP) have conducted hundreds of attacks on schools since 2009, killing students and teachers and abducting schoolchildren—most notoriously in the 2014 Chibok kidnapping and subsequent mass abductions. These attacks have had a profound chilling effect: even schools that have not been attacked are often abandoned by families who fear for their children's safety.

Middle East and North Africa

The conflicts in Syria and Yemen have devastated educational systems that were once relatively robust. In Syria, more than 13 years of civil war have destroyed or damaged an estimated 7,000 schools—nearly half of the country's total. Over 2.1 million Syrian children

inside the country are out of school, with millions more among the Syrian refugee diaspora in Turkey, Lebanon, Jordan, and Egypt facing uncertain access to quality education. The overlay of displacement, trauma, poverty, and language barriers creates compounding challenges for educational continuity.

In Yemen, the conflict that escalated in 2015 has left more than 2 million children out of school. Over 2,500 schools have been damaged or destroyed, and many others have been converted into shelters for internally displaced persons or occupied by armed groups. Teacher absenteeism due to nonpayment of salaries—teachers have not received regular government salaries in many areas for years—further compounds the crisis. In Gaza, the conflict that escalated dramatically in October 2023 destroyed or severely damaged the majority of the territory's educational infrastructure, rendering mass education impossible for the 625,000 students enrolled before the outbreak of hostilities.

South and Southeast Asia

Afghanistan represents one of the longest-running education crises in the world. Following the Taliban's return to power in August 2021, girls above the sixth grade were barred from attending school, and women were banned from universities—a catastrophic reversal that UNESCO and other bodies have characterized as a human rights emergency. Approximately 1.1 million girls of secondary school age have been deprived of their right to education, and women now make up less than 3% of university enrollment. Boys' education also suffers from severe teacher shortages, lack of materials, and ongoing insecurity.

In Myanmar, the military coup of February 2021 and the subsequent civil war have severely disrupted education. The military's civil disobedience movement drew many teachers and students into anticoup activism, and schools have been targeted by military airstrikes. UNICEF estimated that by 2023, over 700,000 children had been displaced, many unable to access schooling. In the Philippines, ongoing conflicts in Mindanao continue to affect school attendance, with communities in conflict-affected areas facing persistent insecurity.

Gender and Vulnerability Dimensions

Gender inequality in educational access is both a cause and a consequence of conflict. In virtually all conflict-affected settings, girls face greater barriers to school attendance than boys: early marriage, sexual violence, economic pressures, and cultural norms all compound the dangers of conflict to keep girls out of school. UNICEF data consistently show that girls from conflict-affected areas have lower school attendance rates, higher dropout rates, and lower learning outcomes than boys in the same settings—and that these gaps widen as conflict intensifies. Children with disabilities, those belonging to ethnic or religious minorities, and children who have experienced trafficking or forced recruitment also face compounded barriers to educational access.

Trends and Emerging Challenges

Several emerging trends are shaping the current situation. First, the duration of conflicts is increasing: the average length of major armed conflicts has grown substantially over the past two decades, meaning that entire cohorts of children grow up without continuous access to education. Second, the use of schools for military purposes—as bases, barracks, weapons storage, or detention sites—remains disturbingly common despite international prohibitions. Third, attacks on education are increasingly being used as deliberate strategies of warfare, to demoralize populations, eliminate future resistance, and control communities. Fourth, climate-related displacement is compounding conflict-driven displacement, creating new pressures on already-strained educational systems.

IV. Actions Taken by the United Nations

The United Nations has developed a multi-pronged response to the crisis of education in conflict zones, spanning norm-setting, funding, programmatic interventions, and advocacy. The following outlines the major frameworks, mechanisms, and actors involved.

Legal and Normative Frameworks

The foundational framework for protecting education in conflict is provided by international humanitarian law (IHL), particularly the Geneva Conventions and their Additional Protocols, which prohibit attacks on civilian objects including educational facilities and require parties to armed conflict to take precautions to protect civilians. International human rights law, particularly the CRC and the ICCPR, complements IHL by enshrining education as an ongoing right even in emergencies.

The UN Security Council has addressed attacks on education through several resolutions. Resolution 1612 (2005) established the Monitoring and Reporting Mechanism (MRM) on grave violations against children in armed conflict, which includes the destruction of schools as a listed grave violation. Subsequent resolutions—including 1882 (2009), 1998 (2011), and 2427 (2018)—have progressively strengthened the monitoring and accountability framework. Resolution 2601 (2021) specifically called on Member States to prevent and respond to attacks on education and the military use of schools.

The Safe Schools Declaration (2015), while not a binding UN instrument, was developed with strong UN support and has become an important international normative commitment. States endorsing the declaration commit to taking concrete measures to protect education during conflict, including by implementing the Guidelines for Protecting Schools and Universities from Military Use during Armed Conflict.

Education Cannot Wait (ECW)

Established in 2016 at the World Humanitarian Summit, Education Cannot Wait (ECW) is the UN's global fund dedicated to education in emergencies and protracted crises. ECW pools contributions from donor governments, the private sector, and other sources to fund education programs in conflict-affected and fragile states. By 2023, ECW had reached over 7 million children in 40+ crisis-affected countries. ECW's multi-year resilience programs (MYRPs) provide multi-year funding to countries including South Sudan, Mali, Somalia, Niger, the Democratic Republic of Congo, and Syria, supporting activities ranging from school rehabilitation and teacher training to psychosocial support and gender-responsive programming.

A key innovation of ECW is its ability to bridge the humanitarian-development divide, providing funding that extends beyond the immediate emergency response to support medium-term educational recovery. ECW has also been at the forefront of integrating mental health and psychosocial support (MHPSS) into its education programs, recognizing that children who have experienced conflict-related trauma cannot learn effectively without targeted psychosocial assistance.

UNICEF and UNESCO

UNICEF is the lead UN agency for education in emergencies at the field level. Through its global presence in over 190 countries, UNICEF provides direct support for school rehabilitation, learning materials, teacher training, cash transfers to support school attendance, and advocacy for the protection of education. UNICEF's Education in Emergencies (EiE) programming reaches millions of children annually in conflict-affected settings.

UNESCO plays a complementary role, focusing on policy, normative guidance, and global monitoring. UNESCO's Global Education Monitoring (GEM) Report provides the most authoritative annual assessment of progress toward SDG 4, with dedicated attention to conflict-affected settings. UNESCO also leads the International Institute for Educational Planning (IIEP) program on 'Protecting Education from Attack' and hosts the Global

Partnership for Education (GPE), which channels substantial resources to education systems in low-income and crisis-affected countries.

The Inter-Agency Network for Education in Emergencies (INEE)

INEE is a global, open network of practitioners, policymakers, and researchers working to ensure the right to quality education in emergencies and post-crisis recovery. INEE developed the Minimum Standards for Education in Emergencies, now in their third edition, which provide a foundational framework for education programming in crisis settings worldwide. INEE also coordinates the Education Cluster system, through which UNICEF and the Norwegian Refugee Council co-lead coordinated humanitarian education responses in over 40 countries.

The Global Coalition to Protect Education from Attack (GCPEA)

While not a UN body itself, the Global Coalition to Protect Education from Attack (GCPEA) was established in 2010 to address the problem of attacks on education through advocacy, norm-setting, and support to national-level action. GCPEA publishes the biennial 'Education Under Attack' report, the most comprehensive documentation of attacks on education globally. Its work has been instrumental in developing and promoting the Safe Schools Declaration. GCPEA operates in close partnership with the UN system, including the CAAC Special Representative and the Education Cluster.

V. Possible Solutions

Addressing the crisis of education in conflict zones requires a comprehensive, multi-layered approach. The following possible solutions reflect a combination of immediate humanitarian interventions, medium-term programming approaches, and long-term policy and legal measures. Delegates should consider how these solutions can be adapted to different conflict contexts, resource environments, and governance situations.

1. Strengthening Legal Protections and Accountability

One of the most fundamental steps is to strengthen the legal framework protecting education in conflict and to ensure effective accountability for violations. States that have not yet endorsed the Safe Schools Declaration should be encouraged to do so. Beyond endorsement, states should implement the accompanying Guidelines for Protecting Schools and Universities from Military Use, which provide operationally specific guidance on how to avoid using educational facilities for military purposes.

The UN Security Council should be encouraged to strengthen the consequences for parties who attack schools or use them for military purposes. This could include referrals to the International Criminal Court for prosecution of the crime of attacking civilian objects (a war crime under the Rome Statute), targeted sanctions against commanders responsible for attacks on education, and the systematic listing of violators in the annexes of the Secretary-General's CAAC report. Member States should ratify and implement the relevant conventions, including the CRC and its Optional Protocols, the Rome Statute, and Additional Protocols I and II to the Geneva Conventions.

2. Digital Learning and Technology-Based Solutions

Digital learning platforms offer significant potential to extend education to children in conflict zones who cannot safely reach physical schools. Radio and television-based distance education has a long track record in emergency settings—programs in Somalia, South Sudan, and Syria have delivered curriculum content to hundreds of thousands of children who would otherwise have no access to schooling. More recently, mobile phone-based learning apps,

such as those developed by the UNHCR's Connected Education initiative, have shown promise in settings where smartphone penetration is growing.

However, digital solutions face significant equity challenges: electricity access, internet connectivity, and device ownership are highly unequal in conflict-affected areas, and girls are often the last to benefit from technology-based approaches due to gender norms around technology use. Effective digital learning programs must be designed with equity principles from the outset, provide offline functionality for low-connectivity environments, be available in local languages, and be integrated with teacher support and psychosocial programming. Satellite-based internet solutions are expanding access in remote areas, and public-private partnerships—with companies such as Starlink, Google, and Microsoft—could be leveraged to provide connectivity in conflict zones.

3. Mobile and Alternative Schooling Models

For internally displaced and nomadic populations, fixed-site schools are often impractical or unsafe. Mobile schools—whether using vehicles, temporary structures, or community spaces—can provide educational continuity for highly mobile populations. Experience from Sudan, Afghanistan, and the Sahel has shown that mobile schools can reach children who would otherwise have no access to education, particularly in the first months and years of displacement.

Accelerated Education Programs (AEPs) are another important tool: these programs, designed for over-age, out-of-school learners, compress multiple years of curriculum into shorter, intensive courses, enabling conflict-affected children who have missed years of schooling to re-enter the education system. AEPs have been successfully implemented in South Sudan, the Democratic Republic of Congo, and Ethiopia. Flexible and alternative learning centers, often operated by NGOs in partnership with local communities, provide a middle ground between formal schooling and completely informal learning.

4. Gender-Responsive Programming

Ensuring gender equity in education access during and after conflict requires targeted, systematic programming that addresses the specific barriers girls face. These include: safe transportation to and from school; single-sex latrines and menstrual hygiene facilities; female teachers (who serve as role models and reduce concerns about gender-based violence); community engagement to challenge norms that prioritize boys' education; and cash transfers and conditional grants tied to girls' school attendance.

Girls who have experienced or are at risk of early marriage, sexual violence, or trafficking require additional psychosocial support and protection mechanisms. Programs that combine education with child protection, health, and economic support for families are more effective at sustaining girls' enrollment and retention than education-only interventions. The Global Partnership for Girls' Education, supported by organizations including the Malala Fund, Plan International, and the African Union, provides useful models for gender-responsive programming in conflict settings.

5. Psychosocial Support and Holistic Education

Research consistently shows that children who have experienced conflict-related trauma—including violence, loss of family members, displacement, and sexual violence—cannot learn effectively without targeted psychosocial support. Education programs in conflict zones should integrate MHPSS approaches from the outset, including structured psychosocial activities, trauma-informed pedagogy, and referral pathways to specialized mental health services where available. The Healing Classrooms model developed by the International Rescue Committee (IRC) is one evidence-based approach to integrating social-emotional learning into education in emergencies.

Long-term support for students whose learning has been severely disrupted requires sustained investment well beyond the immediate humanitarian phase. Educational recovery programs—which address learning loss, provide catch-up curricula, and support students' re-integration into formal education systems—must be funded and implemented over years, not

months. This requires the kind of multi-year, flexible funding that Education Cannot Wait and similar mechanisms are designed to provide.

VI. Countries Involved

The following section outlines the roles and situations of the most heavily affected and most influential states in the debate on safeguarding education in conflict zones. The first five countries are the primary cases; an additional fifteen countries are noted as significant participants in the General Assembly discussion.

1. Syrian Arab Republic

Syria's civil war, now in its fourteenth year, has caused one of the worst education crises in recent history. Since 2011, an estimated 7,000 schools have been damaged or destroyed—nearly half the total. UNESCO estimates that 2.1 million children inside Syria are currently out of school, while over 1 million Syrian refugee children in neighboring countries face barriers to education. The UN has verified over 4,000 attacks on educational facilities since the conflict began. Syria has been listed in the Secretary-General's annual CAAC report for multiple years for grave violations against children, including attacks on schools. International agencies including UNICEF, UNHCR, and ECW fund education programs both inside Syria and for the refugee diaspora, but funding gaps remain severe. The Syrian government endorsed the Safe Schools Declaration in 2015, though attacks on schools have continued throughout the conflict.

2. Republic of Yemen

Yemen's conflict, which escalated with the Saudi-led coalition intervention in March 2015, has created the world's worst humanitarian crisis and one of its worst education crises.

According to UNICEF (2023), more than 2 million Yemeni children are out of school, and over 2,500 schools have been damaged, destroyed, or occupied by armed groups. The World Bank estimates that Yemen's net school enrollment rate has fallen from 79% in 2014 to under 50% by 2023. Teacher salary nonpayment is a structural crisis: the Central Bank of Yemen split in 2016 along conflict lines, and hundreds of thousands of civil servants—including teachers—have gone without regular salaries for years. ECW's Multi-Year Resilience Program for Yemen, launched in 2018, has provided critical support, but funding gaps consistently leave millions of children unserved. Girls face particular barriers to school attendance due to the combination of conflict, economic impoverishment, and conservative social norms.

3. Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan

Afghanistan has experienced almost continuous conflict since the late 1970s, with devastating consequences for education. Despite significant gains in school enrollment between 2001 and 2021—including the enrollment of millions of girls who had been entirely excluded under the first Taliban government—the Taliban's return to power in August 2021 has reversed these achievements for girls and women. As of 2023, approximately 1.1 million girls of secondary school age have been barred from attending school, and universities have been closed to women. UNESCO reported that girls make up just 3% of university enrollment—a historic low. Boys' education also suffers: persistent insecurity, poverty, teacher shortages, and infrastructure destruction affect access throughout the country. UN agencies including UNICEF, UNESCO, and the World Food Programme maintain programs in Afghanistan, but operate under severe restrictions imposed by Taliban authorities. The international community faces a profound dilemma between the imperative to reach Afghan children and the risk of conferring legitimacy on a regime that systematically violates the right to education.

4. Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC)

The DRC is home to one of the world's largest and most complex humanitarian crises, driven by over two dozen active armed groups in its eastern provinces. As of 2023, there are over

6.9 million internally displaced persons in the DRC—the largest IDP population in Africa. Education has been catastrophically affected: the Global Education Cluster estimates that over 3 million children are out of school due to conflict, with hundreds of schools damaged or destroyed. Eastern provinces such as North Kivu, South Kivu, Ituri, and Tanganyika are epicenters of the crisis. UNICEF and its partners fund community-based education, school rehabilitation, and teacher training programs, but reach only a fraction of children in need. The DRC faces additional challenges including high rates of child soldiers—some of whom were recruited from or around schools—and widespread sexual violence that keeps girls out of school. ECW's Multi-Year Resilience Program for DRC is one of the fund's largest investments globally.

5. Republic of South Sudan

South Sudan, the world's youngest nation, has experienced devastating civil conflict since 2013. Despite a peace agreement signed in 2018, localized violence continues to affect millions of people, particularly in states such as Upper Nile, Jonglei, and Unity. According to UNICEF (2023), South Sudan has the highest rate of out-of-school children in the world, with approximately 2.8 million children—about 70% of school-age children—not attending school. Schools have been attacked, occupied by armed forces, and used as shelters by displaced populations. Flooding associated with climate change has compounded conflict-related displacement, further disrupting education. South Sudan has some of the world's lowest education indicators: adult literacy stands at approximately 35%, and girls' enrollment and retention rates are significantly below boys'. ECW, UNICEF, UNHCR, and a range of NGOs implement education programs, but massive funding gaps persist. South Sudan serves as a critical test case for the feasibility of education provision in the most fragile and conflict-affected settings.

6. *Federal Republic of Nigeria*

7. *Federal Republic of Somalia*

8. *Italian Republic*

9. *Argentine Republic*
10. *Federative Republic of Brazil*
11. *Republic of India*
12. *Kingdom of Saudi Arabia*
13. *Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia*
14. *Ukraine*
15. *United Mexican States*
16. *Bolivarian Republic of Venezuela*
17. *Republic of Colombia*
18. *State of Libya*
19. *Federal Republic of Germany*
20. *Kingdom of Norway*
21. *United States of America*
22. *State of Japan*
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24. *French Republic*

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