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**TREADING WATER: A CASE STUDY OF AFGHAN REFUGEES
SURVIVING LONG-TERM TRANSIT LIMBO IN INDONESIA**

Abstract

According to UNHCR's 2016 Indonesia report, there are nearly 7,000 Afghan refugees who have been stuck in Indonesia for years on end, with faint hope of reaching their desired destination, Australia. UNHCR Indonesia has admitted that because of the Syrian crisis, resettling refugees was going to be more difficult and take even longer now than before. In the meantime, refugees miss years of personal development and employment; their children grow up without education or opportunities. With no support from the Indonesian government, and the limited resources from International NGO's focused on humanitarian aid rather than community and human development, refugees in long-term transit in the town of Cisarua have taken to setting up their own learning centres to fill the gaps. These efforts are admirable; however, insufficient analysis has been done regarding what it means to actually run these centres, the impact they have on the refugees, and the impact they have on the surrounding local communities.

This paper is an ethnographic study that explores the impact that involvement with these institutions has on refugees in long term transit. Using a capabilities framework, it analyzes how the refugees are administering them, the impact of these schools on the refugee community, and the situation of those unaffiliated. Further, the paper explores how refugees can be incentivized and supported by outside stakeholders. I hypothesize that, although difficult, life in Indonesia has offered refugees a unique, if unintended, opportunity of empowerment and growth, as they are left to fend for themselves in the absence of government assistance and limited, humanitarian based support from aid organizations. Although it is not the desired destination, being stuck in Indonesia is far better than being stuck in Afghanistan.

Key words: Refugees, Afghanistan, Indonesia, Hazara, Forced Migration

I. Introduction

Cisarua, West Java, Indonesia: Khalil Payeez gets up at 6:00am, makes breakfast for himself and his two housemates, and goes to work managing a school every day. When classes are finished, his work continues, as he responds to emails, manages the school's social media accounts, and checks in with guest teachers and journalists visiting from abroad. He conducts weekly staff meetings, frequent teacher trainings, and liaises with the school's board and donors. By all intents and purposes, this is a demanding full time job; however, Mr. Payeez does not receive any salary, save for a small monthly transportation stipend. He is an Afghan refugee in Indonesia, in his fourth year awaiting resettlement to a third country. Forbidden to officially work or receive a salary, refugees like Mr. Payeez occupy a very precarious position in society, completely reliant on support from families back home or charities in Indonesia for their survival.

The purpose of this paper is to explore the lives of Afghan refugees facing indefinite transit in Indonesia, and the mechanisms they have initiated themselves in order to cope with the limbo. The research shows how these coping mechanisms, particularly the establishment of and involvement with refugee-run learning centres, can alleviate the challenges of transit, and serve as the conversion factors that allow the development of capabilities. This paper uses qualitative data gathered through in-depth interviews and ethnographic research to discover how the refugees have managed to set up and maintain learning centres and community groups, and the impact their involvement therein has on their lives. This research seeks to

contribute to new initiatives being developed for the intermediate and long-term capabilities support of protracted refugee populations.

The refugees' creation of and involvement with the learning centres has a transformative effect on their lives, and has the ability to bring them from vulnerability to capability, giving them control over their own environments. The time and effort they dedicate to administration, lesson planning, teaching, and communicating with donors and foreign guests empowers them and gives purpose and meaning to their time in limbo, and the limbo gives them the time, space, and motivation to grow. These community organization and business management skills could also be transferable in the event that they are resettled to a third country or repatriated to Afghanistan, and advise projects and solutions for other protracted refugee situations.

This paper is an ethnographic study. The units of analysis are individual people, and as such, the author has lived with with two different families (a single mother with two children, and a family with two children and a niece), and a group of single adult men within the Cisarua community. Living with the refugees, the author took all meals together, attended school with the children, helped with cooking and chores, and shadowed the adults in their day to day activities, keeping record of observations and interactions. Further, the paper analyzes testimony from interviews with 20 Afghan refugees living in Cisarua, five experts (including NGO workers in Indonesia, politicians, and activists in Australian communities in which Afghan refugees are settled), and four former managers of refugee learning centres, who have now been resettled to third countries.

Sections II and III of this paper will deal with the background of the refugees in the study, as well as the policies and framework of Indonesia, where they are residing. Following this, sections IV will detail the circumstances of the refugee learning centres in Cisarua, and then analyze the experiences of refugees who are affiliated, and those who are unaffiliated with these learning centres. Finally, section V will conclude and give recommendations for further research and project development concerning refugees in indefinite transit.

II. Afghan Hazara Refugees

Afghanistan has been, and remains to this day, one of the world's most significant refugee-sending countries (UNHCR 2015). Decades of proxy wars, civil war, Taliban rule, and ethnic conflict have

ravaged the country, and with the New Unity Government on the brink of collapse, signs of hope for stability and safety are few and far between. Underlying all of the conflicts are the sharp ethnic divisions that have plagued Afghanistan since its birth. There are four main ethnic groups—Pashtun, Tajik, Uzbek, and Hazara; Pashtuns are the majority. Although these ethnic groups each have their own cultures, languages, and strong tribal codes, Islam serves as the unifying force in the country. The Hazara minority is distinctive from the others, as they are Shia Muslims, whereas the rest are Sunni.

Historically, the Hazara have suffered intense discrimination and persecution, and have narrowly survived two bouts of ethnic cleansing. During the early 20th-century reign of King Abdur Rahman Khan, approximately 60% were murdered or displaced. During the draconian reign of the Taliban, the Shia Hazara were persecuted as *kafir*, or infidels, leading to devastating massacres and the expulsion of over 12,000 to Australia alone (Saikal, A. 2012). Hundreds of thousands more fled to the neighboring countries of Iran and Pakistan. Due to the prolonged instability and conflict in their homeland, many were resigned to remain there, where, despite being unwelcome and unintegrated, they set up lives for themselves. According to Prof. William Maley, the United Nations Assistance Mission in Afghanistan reported that in 2015 there was “a sharp increase in the abduction and killing of civilians of Hazara ethnicity by anti-government Elements. Between 1 January and December Anti-Government Elements abducted at least 146 member of the Hazaras community in 20 separate incidents.... Many attacks on Hazaras go unreported in Western media, and escape the attention of foreign missions understandably preoccupied with protecting their own personnel in Kabul.” (Maley, 2016-2).

Those remaining in Afghanistan largely live in three main areas: a Hazara enclave in the capital city of Kabul; the Hazarajat, a barren, mountainous region in the middle of the country, accessible only by air or Taliban-controlled road; and the district of Jaghori, in Ghazni province. Jaghori is surrounded by Pashtun territory, leaving the Hazara constrained in movement and vulnerable to attack. As a result of this isolation and persecution, thousands of families have fled to the Pakistani border city of Quetta. In recent years, there has been a significant uptick in violence against Hazaras in Kabul, Jaghori, and Quetta, spurring thousands to flee again and seek secondary and tertiary asylum (Hucal, S. 2016, Shuja, A. (2016, HRW 2014). Over the course of several generations, the Hazara have fled from their original homelands, to the Hazarajat, to Kabul and Jaghori, and then to Iran and Pakistan; now, they are fleeing once again.

During the Soviet invasion, a significant Afghan diaspora was established in Australia, which, at the time, had welcoming policies towards asylum seekers. Ever since then, family ties, freedom and security, and refugee-friendly policies have provided a strong pull factor for Afghans, particularly Hazaras. However, in recent years, the policies have changed. 2001's "Pacific Solution" and the more recent "Operation Sovereign Borders" turn boats away from Australian waters and send them to Indonesia, direct refugees to offshore migrant processing centres, and criminalize asylum seekers arriving by boat (Maley 2016-1). Although these policies have served as a deterrent for dangerous sea crossings to Australia, the flow of refugees, particularly from Afghanistan, has continued.

III. Indonesia Refugee Context

Formerly a brief transit point on the way to asylum in Australia, the town of Cisarua, Indonesia, was meant to be a temporary stopover for thousands of refugees from the Middle East, South and Central Asia. However, in 2013, Operation Sovereign Borders (OSB) was implemented, effectively halting all boat arrivals to Australia, and creating a bottleneck of refugees stranded in Indonesia. There are currently about 7,000 Afghan refugees and asylum seekers residing in Indonesia (UNHCR 2016-2), most of whom have been there for several years. Indonesia never signed the 1951 Refugee Convention, so although it hosts immigration detention centers (IDCs)—essentially, jails for irregular migrants—it provides no assistance for asylum seekers or refugees. They are not supported by the government, and thus have little access to resources beyond basic needs.

If registered with UNHCR, refugees are permitted to leave the IDCs, but they cannot work, earn income, or permanently settle in Indonesia. They may live in alternative-to-detention centers run by Jesuit Refugee Services, Church World Service, or other aid agencies, but their capacities are limited. They may also exercise self-settlement, if their personal finances permit. Refugee children are permitted to attend Indonesian schools; however, there are limited spaces, and a Bahasa language requirement (UNHCR 2016-2).

The town of Cisarua is located approximately three hours from Jakarta, accessible to the UNHCR and IOM offices in the capital, but without the overcrowding and high rental prices. Cisarua has become an unusual pull for Afghan refugees; of the town's population of about 100,000, nearly 5,000 are Afghan asylum seekers of the Hazara ethnic minority (Ali, M. 2015, p.26), awaiting refugee-status determination and resettlement. Although Indonesia is a Sunni-majority country, Shia Muslims like the Hazara do not face the same persecution they do in Afghanistan and Pakistan, and women enjoy the same freedoms as

men. Social networks have been built up over the years, as more and more refugees arrive and get stuck. Asylum seekers are now traveling to Indonesia not with the intention of reaching Australia, but to stay in Cisarua and seek resettlement from there.

Unfortunately, despite the improvement in their security conditions, the Afghan refugees face many challenges. Due to the Syrian war, UNHCR warns that resettlement waiting times may be extended by several years. Many of the refugees have already been in Indonesia for up to five years, and are being advised that wait times could increase five to six more. Coming to terms with this prolonged and uncertain transit, and in the absence of support from the Indonesian government, the Afghan refugee community has had to provide livelihoods and development for themselves. As such, some of the refugees have set up and staffed learning centres, which provide schooling for children and English and computer classes for adults. Other refugees have set up community groups such as a women's handicraft group, a karate club, and a football league. These schools and community groups have significantly strengthened the community and given their participants a renewed sense of hope and purpose in their lives of limbo.

IV. Life in Limbo in Cisarua

Following the 2013 implementation of Operation Sovereign Borders, and a series of devastating attacks on Hazara minorities residing in Jaghori, Afghanistan, and Quetta, Pakistan, the town of Cisarua experienced a marked change in its refugee demographic. Instead of just single men transiting through, or getting stuck in the town, now families began arriving. Realizing the children needed to continue with their education, and fueled by international interest generated from a short documentary, "Life as a Hazara Refugee," by refugee Khadim Dai, leaders from within the Afghan refugee community called a meeting to discuss setting up a learning centre. "Many educated refugees in the community were willing to serve through their skills and they discovered that this was an issue they were able to solve themselves" (Ali et al, 2015. p.30). Despite initial setbacks concerning logistics, rumors of immigration crackdowns, and management issues, Cisarua Refugee Learning Centre (CRLC) opened its doors and soon had a waiting list of hundreds. Following this, additional refugee-run centres opened - Refugee Learning Centre, Refugee Learning Nest, and most recently, the Hope Learning Centre. All of these centres are managed and staffed entirely by refugees- some of the teachers are barely graduated from high school themselves, but possess English language skills, and the drive to serve their community. In addition to the learning centres, other community initiatives sprang up as well, including a football club, a women's

handicraft collective, and even a karate centre, run by a woman, who had been a karate black belt champion in Pakistan. These learning centres and community initiatives serve hundreds of refugees and asylum seekers in the area; however, there are still thousands who are unaffiliated with any groups or activity.

Refugees in Indonesia are not permitted to work or generate income. As aid agencies such as the International Organization for Migration (IOM), Church World Service (CWS), and Jesuit Refugee Services (JRS) are underfunded and already stretched to their limits supporting the most vulnerable individuals - unaccompanied minors, single women, and the seriously ill, refugees must rely on their own savings and support from families abroad to survive. All of the individuals affiliated with the learning centres and community groups - from the managers, to the teachers, to the school cleaners, to the community members who help paint and maintain the facilities - are volunteers, and at most might receive a small transportation stipend.

The refugees who participated in this study vary widely in terms of age, marital status, and household size. The average age of respondents was 31 years, with 10 unmarried, 10 married, and household sizes ranged from single unaccompanied male to families of 10 people. The average family size was six people. 16 out of the 20 respondents came to Indonesia in 2013 or early 2014, and all stated the security situation and ethnic persecution as their reasons for leaving their home countries.

The study participants can be separated into two distinct groups; those who are actively involved with a learning centre or community group, and those who are not. Although the legal status of these two groups is the same, and the background and external circumstances are the same, the experiences of these two groups is very different. This section will analyze these two distinct sets of experiences, and evaluate the factors contributing to their different perceptions of life in limbo.

IV a. Surviving in Limbo: Refugees Unaffiliated with Learning Centres or Community Groups

Most of the research respondents who were unaffiliated with community groups had manual labor jobs like farming, driving, carpentry, or mechanics in their origin countries, but felt they could not do these things in Indonesia, due to laws restricting the right to work, as well as language barriers. Many shared that if they were to do work for the learning centres or community, such as construction or maintenance of school buildings, they should be adequately compensated; they did not see the value in doing volunteer work. Instead, they pass their time with English classes offered three days a week by JRS, watching videos on YouTube, and playing video games on their phones. Others follow online English tutorials, and spend the day studying. Single unaccompanied men have had to learn how to do domestic work, an activity often culturally viewed as “women’s work” (including activities such as cooking, laundry, and cleaning), and expressed disdain for these tasks they had to do.

One group of single men revealed that the only time they left their shared house was to go to a weekly English class, or to the bazaar to buy food. Having little interaction with the refugee community, and no interaction with the local Indonesian community, they lamented their seclusion and shared that the interviewer was the first person they had seen in over a week. The future is bleak for any refugee, but for those who are isolated from the community, who find no purpose in life, the future seems like an impossible dream. A group of single, unaccompanied adult men learned the English word “limbo,” as they had no other means of describing their situation.

“How do you spend your time as you await resettlement? What activities are most meaningful to you?” The answer to these questions by refugees unaffiliated with a learning centre or community group was almost universally: “I do nothing all day but sleep, eat, and wait.” One woman stated: “Dar Cisarua budan, misli ki dar jahannam sabz budan ast,” or “Being in Cisarua is like living in a green hell.” (A. Atmar¹, personal interview, 23 April, 2017)². Respondents who were unaffiliated with one of the learning centres generally spoke of crippling depression and anxiety, and despair that paralyzed them from doing anything. Unable to see any future for themselves, let alone for their families for whom they wished to provide, multiple respondents used the same phrase: “Man gij shudum,” or, “my mind has become confused.” (W. Amiri and Momo-e jan, personal interviews 28 and 22 April, 2017).

¹ All names have been changed pseudonyms to protect confidentiality.

² It should be noted that Afghans take the concept of hell very seriously, and would not use a term like “jahannam” lightly or in jest.

Momo-e Jan³ is an elderly man in his mid-70s.⁴ In Jaghori, where he spent his entire life, he was a farmer. He has eight adult children, including one daughter living in the United Kingdom. In 2014, one of his sons was seriously ill, but medical facilities in Jaghori were lacking; therefore, it was necessary to make the dangerous trip from Ghazni province to Kabul, where he could receive treatment. Part of the Ghazni-Kabul road is controlled by the Taliban, who stopped their vehicle and demanded ransom money in order to let them pass. The Taliban continued to threaten the family after this incident, so Momo-e decided to flee for Australia, hoping to later bring his family over. Speaking no English, he hired a smuggler and flew from Kabul to Oman to Malaysia, where he took a boat to Indonesia. Now he lives with two other single men - teachers from CRLC, but is not involved with the centre himself. He said that when his housemates are at school, he has nothing to do, nobody to talk to, and if they are working late, he has no lunch, as he does not know how to cook. He says that he is unhappy and depressed, to the point where in the three years he has been waiting in Cisarua, he has only been able to read one book. He thinks he is too old and depressed to properly learn English, though he does try to speak a little bit. To combat his crippling inactivity, Mome-e walks for two hours every morning, talks to his family, and watches YouTube videos. When asked what he wanted out of life, he shrugged and replied “Chikunum?” or, “What can I really do?”

IV b. Thriving in Limbo: Refugees Affiliated with Learning Centres or Community Groups

Refugees who were affiliated with a learning centre or community group in some way shared drastically different experiences and levels of satisfaction with their lives in long term transit. Respondents came from two different learning centers, and one karate club. All of the above were refugee-initiated, refugee-run projects, and all of the participants work on a voluntary, unpaid basis. The respondents held a variety of jobs and positions in their countries of origin; several were students, some teachers, one translator, one finance officer, and one former karate champion. Still more were housewives, who were unable to leave their homes prior to leaving Afghanistan. Currently, eight of the respondents were teachers at learning centres, three were involved in the administration of centres or community groups, and three were adult students of CRLC. All recognized the importance of their involvement with their respective learning

³ Momo-e Jan’s real name is actually unknown. “Momo” is a respectful name for “Uncle,” and “Jan” is the common Afghan term of endearment meaning “Dear.” Therefore, out of deference for his age and status, everyone refers to him as “Dear Respected Uncle.”

⁴ It is common for Afghans not to know their actual age. Records-keeping have been inconsistent at best for the last several decades, and many of the birth records that were kept were destroyed in the nearly 40 years of conflict the country has suffered

centres; one teacher said that, despite not being paid, “CRLC gives hope. Hope and a timetable!” (S. Adiba, personal interview, 24 April 2017). All respondents expressed frustration with their circumstances - being stuck in a constant state of uncertainty about their futures - but were grateful that having responsibility for other people provided them with structure.

A common thread among the refugees affiliated with learning centres and community groups was the perception of their expanding capabilities. Several mentioned that the time they were spending in Indonesia was giving them the opportunity to expand their capabilities, whether by improving their English skills, or learning completely new skill sets, such as management or communications. Several of the CRLC teachers were actually students who had “graduated” from the program, but wished to continue their involvement. Without proper high school diplomas or acceptable national identification, the former students are unable to attend university, not even online⁵. As in other protracted refugee situations, students in Cisarua “face many obstacles along the way: from the obvious practical issues such as financial shortcomings or ignorance of application procedures, to political and legal issues involving lack of accreditation and citizenship alongside restrictive host country policies” (Zeus 2010, p.259). However, they find that the responsibility of instructing, as well as learning how to behave and create appropriate relationships with the students, other teachers, superiors, and foreign guests was serving as their continuing education.

The teachers and managers in Cisarua receive regular training and professional development from supporting organizations. However, the teachers and managers all stated that the factor that produced the most significant improvement in their capabilities was their exposure to foreigners. Over the years, there has been a fair amount of international media attention on the learning centre and karate club, and the refugees themselves have to be the hosts and ambassadors of their communities, and share their stories with the world. To this end, they have learned how to communicate with journalists, researchers, volunteers, and politicians, as well as maintain social media accounts for the organizations, and produce donor reports. All reported that their English skills, no matter what the baseline, had improved as a result from the interaction with foreigners.

⁵ The majority of the refugees are registered with UNHCR; however, the UNHCR ID card does not provide them with adequate status to apply for universities.

Involvement in the learning centres and community groups also gives hope and purpose during the uncertain waiting time. For Mariam Danish, founder and coach of the Cisarua Refugee Shotokan Karate Club, running the centre is not just a job, it's what gives her life in limbo meaning and purpose. Coaching others enables her to give back to the community, and provide youth and adults with constructive and healthy ways to spend their time (M. Danish, personal interview, 27 April, 2017). Ali Bakhtiyari, finance officer for CRLC, shared that his roommate, who is not affiliated with any learning centre or community group, did absolutely nothing all day, and that if he himself were not part of CRLC, he would likely do the same. Farkhunda Osman revealed that prior to becoming a CRLC student, and subsequently teacher, she and her seven siblings did nothing all day – they sat crammed together in their two bedroom apartment with nothing to do, wasting their childhoods. She said “involvement [with CRLC] has given meaning to life here. Everything else is uncertain, like the refugee status⁶, and what will happen, but CRLC is a reason to keep going.” (F. Osman, personal interview, 19 April 2017).

Nijat Barakzai, a teacher at CRLC, shared that being in Indonesia, where he was free from threat of the Taliban or other persecution, he had learned to do things he never thought necessary or possible, like cooking and cleaning, and generally taking care of himself. He has come to appreciate all the work women traditionally do, which has completely changed his understanding of gender roles and women's rights, which he tries to impart on his students. He accepts the difficulty of his situation along with the good: “If I had gone straight to Australia, I would not have been able to develop as a person in the same way. Being a refugee has made me face difficulties. We want to stop THIS life. This is the best time in our lives, but we are stuck in limbo. Like birds whose wings are tied, we cannot fly. But... I am glad I am spending my time meaningfully; in every hard situation lies an opportunity. I am ok.” (N. Barakzai, personal interview, 30 April 2017).

V. Conclusion and Recommendations

No matter the level involvement with the learning centres or engagement with the community, every refugee had one thing in common. Each person knew exactly how long they had been in Indonesia.

⁶ Farkhunda and her family are an unusual case in Cisarua; they were the only respondents who did not have refugee status with UNHCR. Their initial claim in 2013 was rejected without explanation, and their first appeal had just been rejected. The 10 members of the Salehi family are in an extremely precarious situation, as they are not protected by UNHCR, the Indonesian government, nor Afghanistan.

Respondents did not say things like “I have been here for about two and a half years;” but rather, “I have been in Indonesia for two years, six months, three weeks, and one day.” Every conversation eventually turns to the inevitable question “Have you heard from UNHCR? How is your resettlement case?” No matter how they are coping with life in limbo, either thriving or just surviving, every refugee has the dark cloud of uncertainty hanging over their heads. No matter how good or bad their current situation may be, every refugee is seeking the same thing: to be resettled to a third country, where they can enjoy peace and stability, and get on with the business of living their lives.

Tim Watts, an Australian MP who was visiting the community at the time of research, noted the optimism and resilience of the refugees at CRLC: “A life in waiting does not need to be wasted time,” and those affiliated with the centres are certainly making the most of their prolonged transit time (T. Watts, personal interview, 18 April 2017). In fact, some of the refugees were so satisfied with their situation, they felt the limbo was a blessing. Ali Bakhtiyari, the CRLC finance officer, like everyone in the Cisarua refugee community, struggles with the psychological blocks of limbo, which prevent him from being able to plan for his own future, but acknowledges that it is a “zندان خود خواهستا,” or a “self-imposed prison.” Therefore, he feels compelled to make the most of his time, and has learned that he is actually able to help himself. He stated: “Limbo has given me the opportunity, the gift of time and space. I lost a lot of money and a lot of time, but instead I found myself.” (A. Bakhtiyari), personal interview, 19 April 2017).

Many in the refugee community in Cisarua have learned how to change their vulnerability into capability. By creating their own institutions, by helping themselves in the absence of government assistance, by building meaningful lives for themselves, they are more than just hopelessly surviving limbo. These refugees working with the Cisarua Refugee Learning Centre, the Cisarua Refugee Shotokan Karate Club, and the many other institutions in the area are actually thriving. What they lack, aside from the obvious finances, certifications, and rights to continue their education and work, are the resources to expand their initiatives. Sister Taka Ghani, a counselor with Jesuit Refugee Services, described them thusly: “Refugees are **STRONG** (emphasis hers). They often have little idea of just how strong they are, but they have overcome so much already. They just need to awaken the sleeping leaders among them, and they can do anything.” (T. Ghani, personal interview 26 April, 2017).

It has been proven that the refugees themselves are more than capable of taking control of their present situations, and finding creative ways to transform their vulnerability into capability. In order to improve the lives of those refugees unaffiliated with learning centres or community groups, it is imperative that means of integration are provided and supported. According to CRLC founder Khadim Dai, refugees do not need capacity building workshops from NGOs, nor do they need foreign donors to simply throw money at them. Rather, supporters should spread awareness about refugees, get to know refugees, “walk with refugees shoulder by shoulder,” and simply let the world know that they are people, too. (K. Dai, personal interview, 22 May, 2017). Teacher Farkhunda Osman expressed similarly the need to be recognized “as a human being, not as a ‘refugee’ or an ‘asylum seeker,’ but as a human being. Not charity, but as a human.” (F. Osman, personal interview, 19 April 2017). Therefore, the role of the international community is to acknowledge, support, and embrace refugees as fellow humans, and to help “awaken the sleeping leaders among them,” so their empowerment can come from within.

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