

Forum: United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime

Issue: Combatting the Rise of Drug Production and Trafficking in West Africa

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Introduction

Situated between major drug-production regions in Latin America and lucrative consumer markets in Europe, West Africa has increasingly emerged as a strategic crossroad of the global illicit drug trade. However, a kilogram of narcotics moving through West Africa does not travel in isolation. Its route intersects with corruption, organised crime, porous borders, and institutions already struggling with limited enforcement capacity.

West Africa's trafficking crisis emerged prominently in the mid-2000s – especially within Nigeria, Guinea-Bissau, Ghana, Senegal, and Mali – when transnational criminal networks increasingly used the region as a transit route for cocaine moving from Latin America to European markets. Porous borders, extensive coastlines, and limited law-enforcement capacities made the region particularly vulnerable to organised crime, such as illicit trafficking networks. Over time, the issue expanded beyond transit into domestic production and consumption, increasingly affecting youth, vulnerable communities, public health, and governmental institutions. In response, Economic Community of Western African States (ECOWAS) and the United Nations Office of Drugs and Crime (UNODC) have promoted regional cooperation, stronger law enforcement, and treatment programmes for the prevention of illicit drug production and consumption. Yet, trafficking networks continue to adapt and expand.



Figure 1: Seized illegal medicine in Senegal (ADF)

Definition of Key Terms

Illicit Drug Trafficking

Drug trafficking refers to the illegal global cultivation, manufacturing, distribution, and sale of substances under drug prohibition laws. Trafficking commonly takes place through global routes, especially through corrupt and weaker borders and maritime security, where drugs can easily be smuggled. This issue is prominent in developing states in Africa, South Asia, and South America.

Informal Economy

An informal economy is the part of an economy that is neither taxed nor monitored by any form of government; economic practices are carried out by self-employed individuals without formal contracts or benefits. Within the drug production and trafficking industry, workers are subject to hard labour and drug abuse, escalating gang violence, corruption, and transnational crime.

Narco-corruption

The use of bribery, coercion, or other forms of influence by drug-trafficking organisations to compromise law enforcement, or actors abiding the law to protect and facilitate illicit activity. In less economically developed states (LEDCs), where corruption and weaker security are prevalent, illicit drug activities are heightened due to lack of compliance and instability.

State Capacity

The ability of a government to accomplish policy goals, international obligations, and domestic advances in reference to specific aims. More narrowly, state capacity can often be referred to as the ability of a state to enforce law and order. Higher state capacity is extensively associated with long-term economic development, legitimacy, and effective governance. States with higher rates of drug production and trafficking can be contested as having weaker state capacity, as crimes are the aftermath of weaker forms of governance.

Transnational Organised Crime (TOC)

Refers to organised crime coordination across national borders, involving groups or markets of individuals to plan and execute illegal business activities. TOCs jeopardise peace and security, undermine economies, and endanger livelihoods. The activities of TOCs take many forms, but the ramifications are the same: weakened governance, lawlessness, open violence, and death.

Background

From the late twentieth to the early twenty-first centuries, West Africa played a crucial role in drug production and trafficking, while its landscape endured significant shifts. It initially acted as a major transit hub supporting the cocaine trade from South America to Europe but has since emerged as a production hub due to a lack of regional security and increasing demand from both domestic and foreign consumer markets. On the other hand, weak governance, especially in monitoring coastal areas and borders, and feeble efforts to resist constant corruption, along with the poverty of the majority, create an ideal hub for drug activities. These multifaceted factors therefore contributed to its rapid rise in drug related circumstances, which fundamentally reduces the effectiveness of previous attempts to resolve the crisis.

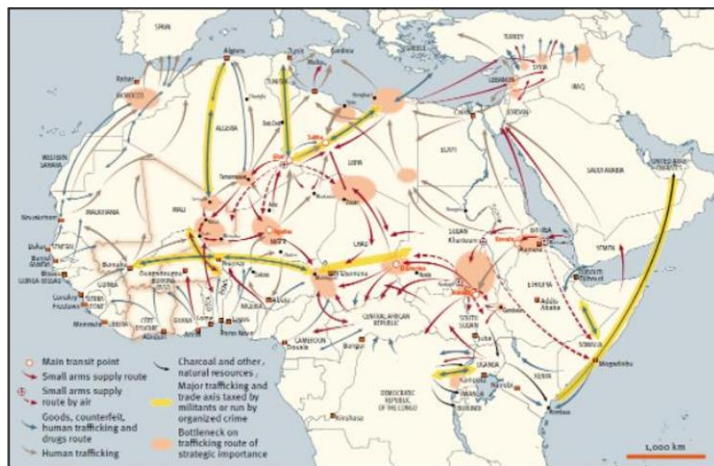


Figure 2: West Africa and trans-Saharan trafficking routes (ECFR)

Transit Hub

The West African countries along the Atlantic Ocean were a key corridor for Latin America and Europe transportation of drugs. Cocaine often arrived by sea, was offloaded to separate boats to enter informal port routes, and was directed into unguarded areas, where both the local community and corrupt governance were situated.

In the late 1990s, cocaine first arrived in the region of West Africa, primarily through the exploration of efficient trade routes. These European products crossed weak states, with porous borders and ineffective law enforcement present. Guinea-Bissau's archipelago of mangrove islands, linguistic similarities to Brazil and Portugal, and its unstable politics presented its geographical advantage as a transit hub for illegal trafficking networks. There have been past interventions, as European interdiction strengthened, restricting it to direct routes; however, in the past decade, trade routes were again active. This was driven by the increase in cocaine demand in Europe and intensified pressure on Latin America Europe trade routes, compelling traffickers to escape relatively ungoverned passages. Cocaine seizures burst, as hauls in Senegal, Guinea-Bissau, and Côte d'Ivoire forced West Africa to reevaluate its institutional weaknesses. The weak monitoring of illegal networks was caused by a lack of resources, investigation capacity, and inefficient cross-border coordination within the region.

Shift to Domestic Production and Consumption

During the late 2000s, there was an emergence of large-scale methamphetamine production, which could be synthesized with the required chemicals, without the need for the coca leaf cultivation process. In 2009, Nigeria's production of methamphetamine surged, ultimately shifting into internal drug activities. During the 2020s, the US's pressure on Mexican cartels compelled original transit corridors into North America, forcing those organisations to settle in other regions. The seizure of over two tons of methamphetamine in a laboratory of Mexican chefs denotes West Africa's significant shift from a smuggling corridor to a production centre.



Figure 3: Reported methamphetamine flows in West Africa (GI-TOC)

Weak Governance and Corruption

The drastically increasing emergence of drug production and trafficking activities in West Africa was the result of structural weaknesses. Especially in considering the region's overall weak governance and persistent corruption practices, consistent regional instability further benefits these illegal activities, strengthening their networks across the area. Such a rapidly growing cocaine trade poses significant threats to governance, as the ongoing networks are often based on political protection. The severe bribery and lack of oversight were the result of weak law enforcement strategies and a lack of strict management, which fuels a further decomposition of the feeble structure. Moreover, the drug trade could empower criminal informal economies, especially for terrorist groups in the area, utilising improperly regulated gateways for illicit transport. The dramatically growing dependence of the elite establishment, specifically considering urban developments, state assets, and construction booms, on external illicit funding and informal activities demonstrates a continuously increasing trend. According to Enact Africa, informal illicit funding emerged as the main source of revenue for formal economies, where citizens receive fewer state services, as external, state-linked bodies direct the majority of criminal events in approximately half of the African countries.

Consumer Market

The escalating drug crisis amplifies how the region of West Africa has shifted from a mere transit hub to a large consumption centre, as the consumer market has demonstrated a large boom in domestic demand. To effectively address the problem, it is vital to consider the drug market's main audience to understand the composition of the population that regularly practices drug consumption.

Youth Population

The drug market's main consumer base is predominantly the youth population, according to previous West African Epidemiology Network on Drug Use report statistics. Secondary students and adolescents are labelled as high-risk groups, as a young beginning could easily evolve into higher-level drug misuse. Reports highlight the significance of peer influence, which drives individuals, especially those lacking a sense of individuality, to simply follow the crowd and be tempted to commit illegal actions, such as involvement in drugs. As they eventually become adults, an early initiation into drug-related activities would compel them to deepen their illegal footprints.

Poverty and Unemployment

Records indicate that around one third of patients admitted for substance use disorders (SUDs) were affected by poverty and unemployment. These factors affected both young people and adults, as poverty compels people to bear immense pressure to support their families. With limited access to higher education opportunities and scarce available job spots, they turned to drugs, which offer them temporary relief from their vulnerable circumstances and the social burden they carry, fueling future drug disorders and addiction.

Porous Borders

West Africa's borders rank among the most permeable and unguarded boundaries, with weak governmental interventions and unregulated management. From the historical lens, colonial powers constructed boundaries disregarding the original ethnic communities, which resulted in them being culturally neglected. Most local communities involve crossing frontiers on a daily basis, for instance, whilst treating livestock, transporting goods, and other normal activities. However, traffickers utilised the porous nature for unjust purposes, disguising themselves as similar initiatives with the borderland populations. Across the region of West Africa, transatlantic drug trafficking on coastal routes routinely continues, as weak maritime oversight allows convenient transportation. The limited scanning and monitoring capacity, accompanied by the extended coastline, makes it easy to conduct illicit activities due to weak maritime oversight. Furthermore, only one third of Africa's 83,000 km of interstate land borders are distinguished. Without defined borders, there is a lack of officially recognised patrol posts. Along with that, most marked borders may only appear on paper but are unrecognised by the majority of the population, as the physical boundaries may be covered in dense forests, posing a challenge to regular monitoring. These unmonitored areas create what are called "ungoverned spaces", where smugglers, traffickers, and armed bands could easily challenge and trespass. As wars arise between countries, armed groups exploit gaps for illicit materials and goods, funding essential weaponry. These offers are met with protected trafficking routes. Corruption and

political interference are often seen in such undeclared links between suspects and political elites, which undermines public trust and government authority. These officials became key nodes for cross-border trafficking networks, supporting the drug flow along the region, providing intelligence, protection, and facilitation. The agencies that were intended for guarding purposes became one of the root causes for border porosity.

Seizure Accounts

Data from West African countries demonstrate the seizure of over 953035 kg of illicit drugs, with approximately 1.5 million kg of pharmaceuticals from legal transports. Though seizures undoubtedly only highlight a portion of captured drug trafficking, they successfully showcase some dominant drugs in this complicated network. The landscape comprises mostly Cannabis, Cocaine, Heroin, and Tramadol.

Cannabis

Cannabis has consistently ranked top in seizure amounts, including from 2022 to 2024, displaying a continuously growing trend, from around 70% to 86% in 2024. 2024 reports documented how cannabis seizures mounted to over 418,000 kg for 11 countries, with most from Nigeria, which represents around half of West Africa's total population. Cannabis derivatives, such as kush and hashish, indicate the diversification of cannabis markets. These drug mixtures have been spreading among urban youth as well as women, as these solutions are highly addictive and harmful due to a lack of standardised composition, with unpredictable aftermaths.

Cocaine

Cocaine ranks second in seizure accounts, mainly arriving for transit purposes, with around 13,200 kg. Cocaine production has been continuously increasing, while Europe and the Americas remain the major markets, as West Africa's consumption gradually rises due to increased local drug availability. They are mainly concentrated within Senegal, at approximately 7,500 kg, signifying their stance as a key node for trafficking networks.

Heroin

Records document that nearly a fifth of the global heroin seizures were conducted in Africa. The gradual 2% growth from 2020 to 2024 indicates the significant impact it has on the drug landscape of African regions. Most of it from West Africa was imported by East Africa and transported to African markets and to European-focused global consumers.

Tramadol and Amphetamine-type stimulants (ATS)

Tramadol, as a medically utilised substance, has been misused as an addictive drug, with over 6000 kg in solid form and around 5,000,000 kg of derived tablets, with Guinea holding the most. ATS seizures account for nearly 23,000 kg, with most hauled in Togo, which is unclearly defined due to the variation of synthetic drugs. The affordability of both has made them accessible to most of the youth population, which is mainly due to West Africa's opioid crisis.

Major Parties Involved

European Union (EU)

West Africa has historically served as an intermediary trafficking route connecting cocaine distributing states in West Africa to European markets, making instability and weak border enforcement in the region a direct security concern for the EU. Large amounts of these drugs, derived from weak maritime security, commercial shipping, and pleasure yachts, are destined for European markets. Despite engaging with Western Africa's drug issues, the EU maintains a strong stance against illicit drug production and trafficking, while framing the issue as both a security and public-health challenge.

Recognising the transnational nature of trafficking networks, the EU is increasing its cooperation with partner countries within Latin America and West Africa, including Sierra Leone and Ghana, to crack down on the illicit trade and flow of drugs in Europe. More specifically, the EU and West African states are currently cooperating through maritime projects, such as the EU-funded Seaport Cooperation Project (SEACOP) initiative, to strengthen the response to narcotics trafficking by maritime law enforcement agencies in West Africa (European Union). The EU has additionally strengthened cooperation with Latin American states through mechanisms such as the EU-CELAC Coordination and Cooperation Mechanism on Drugs, through which both regions have committed to addressing cocaine trafficking, synthetic drugs, and illicit drug production. The EU therefore seeks not only to intercept drugs entering Europe, but also to strengthen international cooperation across the entire supply chain.

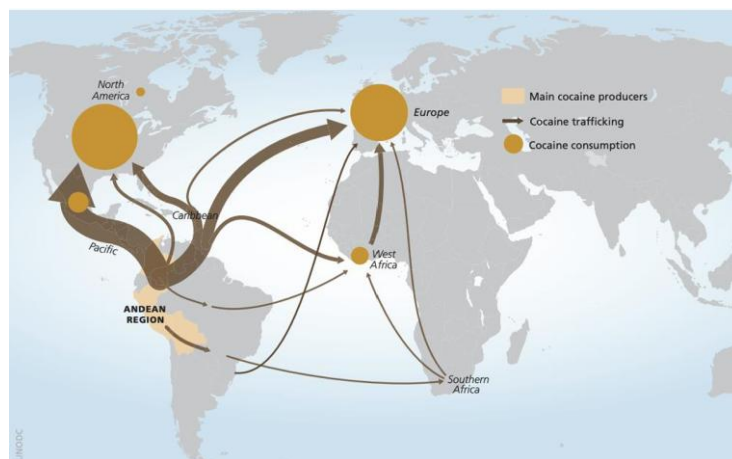


Figure 4: Global cocaine flows mapped, 2010 (UNODC)

Federal Republic of Nigeria

The Federal Republic of Nigeria, a transit point for heroin and cocaine for the European, East Asian, and North American markets, are one of the major importers and exporters of Western Africa, despite being identified as one of the most effective drug-controlling states. Between the years 2000 2014, a total of 86,314 persons were arrested for drug trafficking related offences; however, due to the subsequent breakdown of the oil industry, as well as new tariffs on exported natural resources, many Nigerians were incentivised to turn to the less restricted drug trade to sustain their livelihoods. Over time, the reliance on drug production and trafficking has led to a global

presence of Nigerian criminal networks; the reputation of Nigeria as the source of drug syndicates has incited domestic gang violence and international condemnation, resulting in a cycle of struggle and political instability. Nigeria maintains a strong official stance against the production, trafficking, and consumption of illicit drugs, viewing the issue as both a security threat and an obstacle to socioeconomic development. With establishments such as the National Drug Law Enforcement Agency (NDLEA) in 1989 – a non-governmental organisation responsible for investigating, disrupting, and prosecuting drug-related activities – Nigeria has further initiated international cooperation through the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) and UNODC, recognising that transnational trafficking cannot be effectively addressed alone. Today, Nigeria aims to strengthen borders and maritime security, while addressing public health conditions that allow illicit drug markets to persist.

Latin America

Latin America plays a central role in the illicit drug trade affecting West Africa, particularly as the principal source for cocaine trafficking across the Atlantic. Colombia, Peru, and Bolivia remain major cocaine-producing states. Current UNODC data identifies Colombia, followed by Peru and Brazil, as the main departure countries for cocaine shipments globally between 2020 and 2024. Historically, cocaine originating in South America has been transported by maritime, air, and container routes into West Africa before being redirected elsewhere, creating an interregional trafficking network connecting Latin American producers and criminal networks with West African transit hubs and European consumers.

Latin American governments do not maintain a singular unified drug policy; however, regional and international cooperation has increasingly focused on disrupting transnational criminal networks, strengthening law enforcement, reducing illicit production and improving information sharing with destination and transit states. For West Africa, cooperation with Latin American states is therefore important for addressing the drug trade at its source and along Atlantic transport routes rather than relying on interception once narcotics have entered Western African territory.

Republic of Ghana

Ghana was first exposed to illicit drugs during World War II when Ghanaian soldiers encountered the substance in South Asia. Consequently, cultivation and consumption became a widespread issue rapidly – positioning Ghana as now the second largest West African producer of cannabis. The escalation of illicit drug trafficking from local communities and youth fuels domestic drug consumption. Whilst law enforcement authorities continue to arrest low-level narcotics traffickers, corruption, insufficient resources, and porous borders heavily impede drug interdiction efforts, making the success rate of pursuing leading trafficking organisations very low. Since 2013, Ghana has opened West Africa Regional Training Centres (RTCs), offering training opportunities for law enforcement and justice sector officials across regions – this initiative has trained participants from over 15 countries with tailored sessions regarding anti-corruption, drug investigation, and values of upholding democratic governance.

Because Ghana's political leadership is committed to combating narcotics trafficking and maintaining international cooperation on counternarcotic initiatives, Ghana remains a priority under the West Africa Civil Society Institute (WACSI). Through WACSI programs, the government of Ghana is supported in capacity building for complex investigations, conducting fair trials of transnational criminals, and combating escalating drug abuse. In furtherance, Ghana aims to partner with major powers, specifically the United States, to improve security and lawful compliance.

Republic of Guinea-Bissau

Guinea-Bissau has become one of the most prominent transit states for cocaine trafficking between Latin America and Europe, with its Atlantic coastline, numerous offshore islands, and limited maritime surveillance, vulnerabilities for transnational criminal networks heighten. Guinea-Bissau's political instability and corruption have further constrained the state's ability to effectively investigate and prosecute high-level traffickers, contributing to Guinea-Bissau's international reputation as a major entry point for cocaine into West Africa.

Guinea-Bissau maintains a concrete stance against illicit drug trafficking and transnational organised crime, highlighting international assistance and regional interdependence as necessary to compensate for its limited domestic capabilities. The state has committed itself to international frameworks such as the United Nations Convention against Transnational Organised Crime (UNOTC) and the international drug-control conventions. Guinea-Bissau has further aligned with organisations such as UNOWAS, INTERPOL, and the West Africa Coast Initiative to mandate stricter law-enforcement and TCU capabilities. Nevertheless, a significant gap remains between formal commitments and effective implementation, as limited resources, instability, and insufficient control over significant territories continue to override implementation.



Figure 5: West Africa drug trade hub hotspots 2025 (Global Initiative)

United Nations Office for West Africa and Sahel (UNOWAS)

UNOWAS, with endorsement from UNODC and the European Union (EU), addresses the serious security threat posed by drug trafficking, specifically in the West African-Sahelian region. UNOWAS promotes political dialogue, mediation, and conflict prevention – working closely with regional organisations and national authorities to coordinate responses to cross-border challenges, such as transnational drug trafficking and production.

UNOWAS aims to foster long-term stability, building resilient initiatives through programs and frameworks. Key cornerstones include ECOWAS' Regional Action Plan to Address Illicit Drug Trafficking, Organised Crime and Drug Abuse, which supports implementation alongside UNODC and calls for stronger law enforcement, criminal justice cooperation, and information sharing across the region. The West Africa Coast Initiative is another major implementation mechanism, established in coordination with UNODC, UNOWAS and INTERPOL to help states with strengthening Transnational Crime Units (TCUs) and improving border management, anti-money-laundering systems, and justice institutions.

Previous Attempts to Resolve the Issue

- Enhancing international cooperation to strengthen efforts in West Africa to counter illicit drug trafficking, 14 July 2013 (**CND/RES/56/16**)
- International cooperation to address and counter the world drug problem, 16 December 2021 (**A/RES/76/188**)
- Improving the governance and financial situation of the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime: extension of the mandate of the standing open-ended intergovernmental working group on improving the governance and financial situation of the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime, 10 July 2021 (**CND/RES/64/7**)
- Strengthening of the principle of common and shared responsibility as the basis for guiding international action in combating the world drug problem with a comprehensive and balanced approach, 14 July 2013 (**CND/RES/56/8**)
- Strengthening international cooperation in countering the world drug problem focusing on illicit drug trafficking and related offences, 12 March 2010 (**CND/RES/53/8**)

Possible Solutions

The growing production and trafficking of illicit drugs in West Africa presents a greater image of regional insecurity, political instability, and lack of equality regarding socioeconomic opportunities. As transnational criminal networks continue to exploit porous borders, addressing this issue requires a comprehensive and coordinated approach. Effective solutions must extend beyond domestic enforcement and target underlying factors that enable drug trafficking while strengthening international cooperation and institutional resilience.

Strengthening Joint ECOWAS Cooperation

Borders are not obstacles in the West African drug trade. Illicit production, transport, alongside transnational crimes stem from weak security, therefore, strengthening cooperation between the West African states will efficiently decrease the causations and eliminate the impacts of illicit drug production and trade. Cooperation can be seen through joint security initiatives between the shared borders across Western Africa. Member states can

strengthen regional cooperation through the establishment of a proposed ECOWAS Regional Anti-trafficking Intelligence Hub in Accra, Ghana, facilitating collaboration between states not limited to Togo, Côte d'Ivoire, Benin and Nigeria. The approach of the anti-trafficking hub is to monitor transfer data, share best practices of preserving border security, but also to communicate with international hubs such as the EU and Latin American states. This way, the Western African states establish security without infringing state sovereignty, whilst actively sharing regional proposals in coordination with externally effected entities.

Enhancing Judicial Capacity and Accountability

Corruption, weak judicial institutions, and inconsistent legal enforcement across West Africa are major contributors to the prevalence of drug production and trade. Therefore, strengthening judicial capacity is essential to prevent organized crime from undermining the rule of law. Member States can pursue national judicial reforms and expand cooperation with UNODC's West African Network of Central Authorities with Prosecutors against Organized Crime (WACAP). Through specialized judicial training, greater judicial independence, and coordinated cross-border prosecutions, these initiatives would promote transparent and sustainable criminal justice systems throughout the region. However, the way judicial reforms are undertaken should take democratic values in accountability; this can be achieved through cooperation of Western-European Member States or sharing best practices through the UNODC.

Promoting Youth Opportunities

The youth remain as one of the most prevalently relied on community, whilst actively suffering from majority of the drug production and trade's consequences. States such as Sierra Leone, Guinea, and Liberia have experiences increasing numbers of youth addiction, drug abuse, and drug induced deaths.

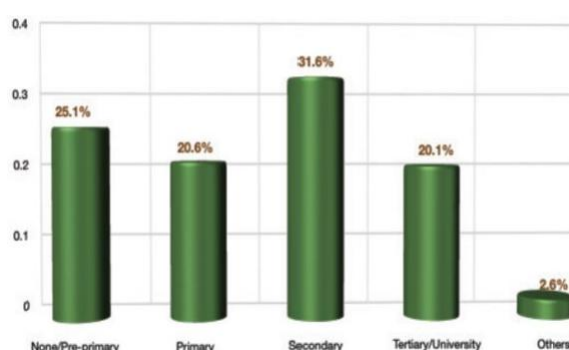


Figure 6: Educational status for people in treatment of substance abuse, 2018-2019 (WENDU)

To combat this, promoting youth opportunities through accessible education, employment, and healthcare is essential to preventing drug abuse among younger populations. Member States can introduce vocational training programmes, expand educational opportunities, and provide accessible mental health and rehabilitation services to support vulnerable youth. This can be approached through the establishment of international programmes targeted at promoting such opportunities within the African states, or domestically, Western African states can apply more

fundings towards educational, healthcare, and employment infrastructure. Through these opportunities, member states can reduce the risk of addiction and strengthen the well-being of future generations.

Expanding the West Africa Coast Initiative (WACI)

Despite existing regional initiatives, limited investigative resources and coordination continue to hinder efforts to combat transnational drug trafficking in West Africa. Expanding WACI would strengthen its existing TCUs through increased technical assistance, specialized investigative training and modern drug detection equipment. Participating states could further establish standardized intelligence sharing procedures and expand cooperation with neighboring states to coordinate cross-border investigations. Supported by UNODC and NGOs, these measures would improve the identification and prosecution of trafficking networks while accentuating long-term operational capacity of national law enforcement institutions.

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