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## Intelligence Report

Office of African and Latin American Analysis

24 August 1995

### Mexico: Referendum Key to Progress in Chiapas

*The Zapatista National Liberation Army (EZLN) is sponsoring a nationwide referendum on Sunday to determine the level of public support for its entrance into the political arena. A "yes" vote--which we see as most likely, given the way the questions are framed--would enhance the group's confidence in its postsettlement prospects and provide it a pretext for laying down arms.*

- *[redacted] the EZLN's limited military wherewithal is steadily eroding, increasing the Zapatistas' incentive to cut a deal soon.*
- *Nevertheless, public endorsement of a political role for the group could spur a last-ditch push by the rebels for concessions on national-level political reform.* [redacted]

*A thumbs down vote would reduce prospects for quick progress in the peace talks.*

- *We believe the rebels would opt for a two-track strategy that would combine renewed dialogue aimed at finding a way to preserve the group's local sphere of influence with disruptive tactics in Chiapas designed to revive rank-and-file enthusiasm and regain some credibility.*

*We doubt that the EZLN would completely abandon the talks or attempt armed attacks on civilian or military targets, however, because such action would increase the likelihood that Mexico City would ratchet up the military pressure.*

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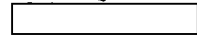
### Talks at a Stalemate

Government and rebel representatives have made little progress in bridging their differences in peace negotiations that began in April. When the fifth negotiating round ended in late July, major points of contention included:

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### Terms of the Referendum

The stalemate in talks between the rebels and the government has led many observers to look to Sunday's referendum to provide a breakthrough. The Civic Alliance, a nongovernmental organization, and the National Democratic Convention, a loose alliance of leftist political organizations associated with the EZLN, are organizing the vote at the rebels' request. Participants will be asked the following five questions posed by the Zapatistas:

- Should the EZLN become a new and independent political force?
- Should the EZLN unite with other forces and organizations to form a new political organization?
- Are you in agreement that the public demands of the Mexican people are land, life, work, nourishment, health, education, culture, information, independence, democracy, liberty, justice, and peace?
- Should the different democratic forces unite into one large opposition front and fight for the 13 aforementioned principal demands?
- Should the political system be reformed in a profound way in order to guarantee respect for the vote, reliable registration lists, and recognition of all political forces?

[redacted]

- *Military Goals.* Mexico City wants to keep the Army in the forward positions it has occupied since the February campaign to isolate the rebels, while the EZLN is set on securing withdrawal of government forces.
- *Scope of negotiations.* The Zedillo administration is determined to confine a final settlement to local issues, while the EZLN wants concessions on national concerns that have become increasingly central to its agenda since the government has addressed many of the group's local demands.<sup>1</sup> [redacted]

The two sides' sharply different negotiating tactics have hampered progress.

- Government representatives have publicly expressed frustration with repeated rebel recesses for consultations; [redacted] they have little respect for their EZLN counterparts [redacted]
- The rebels, for their part, have publicly accused government spokesmen of seeking to speed the talks with threats and bribes. [redacted]

[redacted] Mexico City is quietly trying to break the deadlock by initiating direct talks with EZLN leader Marcos. Zedillo reportedly hopes discussions can be held secretly and without the Bishop Ruiz-led mediating commission, which Mexico City believes is partial toward the rebels. Although [redacted] Marcos responded positively to an initial government feeler on the issue, the government subsequently rejected his negotiators' public call for direct talks-- apparently to avoid the perception of caving in to rebel demands. [redacted]

### **EZLN Disarray Impeding Settlement**

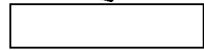
[redacted] the EZLN is diminishing as a coherent force, narrowing the group's options. The government's military cordon--14,400 troops have been maintained in the Chiapas theater since the February offensive, [redacted] [redacted] has compounded rebel difficulties in communicating and obtaining supplies.

<sup>1</sup> On 15 May, the Chiapas state government promulgated an electoral law approved by all political parties.

[redacted]

Zedillo is expected to announce a comprehensive social program for Chiapas in his state of the union address on 1 September. [redacted]

This memorandum was prepared by [redacted] Office Of African and Latin American Analysis, with contribution from [redacted] Comments and queries are welcome and may be directed to Chief, [redacted]



- By April, [redacted] the military's presence had isolated the rebels and that illness, lack of medical attention, shortages of water and food, and the stress of being besieged in the jungle had sapped their effectiveness and morale, [redacted]  
[redacted]
- The advent of peace talks in April added to disarray in rebel ranks by separating some units from their leaders for extended periods of time.

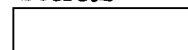
[redacted] desertions have reduced rebel strength to fewer than 500 armed members--from an estimated 2,000 in February--and that the group's demands on the local populace for scarce food and medical supplies are costing it support. [redacted]

Perhaps reflecting the military squeeze, Zapatista leaders have not been able to work out a consensus among EZLN factions on military or negotiating strategies, [redacted]  
[redacted] At least some rebel factions are anxious for a quick settlement. In contrast, [redacted] two indigenous groups providing important assistance to the EZLN would prefer to scuttle the talks and continue the armed rebellion. [redacted]

### Public Opinion Referendum Key

Faced with declining leverage and confused over tactics, the rebels have focused on the referendum to assess popular sympathy for their cause and to try to rally support for their agenda. Although the nationwide vote probably will suffer from organizational difficulties and attract only limited public interest, it is likely to produce sufficiently positive results to allow the EZLN to claim acceptance of its goals and to justify its entry into the political arena. Arrangements for the vote--the public recognizes this is a Zapatista initiative, and the group's symbol will be on the ballot--will drive away moderate voters likely to register "no" votes. Moreover, the [redacted]  
[redacted] EZLN appears to have designed the questions to elicit a positive response. Results of two trial polls of Mexico City residents in mid-June suggest reaction will be generally positive.

- Eighty-two percent of 500 respondents to a poll carried out by a Mexico City daily approved the EZLN's list of principal demands. Forty-five percent said the EZLN should form a new political organization on its own, but another 29 percent said the Zapatistas should do so in conjunction with other groups.
- Ninety-five percent of 400 respondents to a survey carried out by a respected independent magazine registered approval for the political aims



contained in the referendum. Twenty-five percent said they favor the EZLN acting on its own to form a new political organization, while 31 percent said the Zapatistas should work with other forces.

### **"Yes" Vote Could Presage End of Rebellion**

We judge a "yes" vote would be a net plus for peace talks by increasing rebel confidence in the EZLN's postsettlement prospects and by providing a face-saving pretext for laying down arms. Positive public reaction would strengthen rebel moderates, perhaps tilting the balance in favor of an agreement that ends the group's 20-month belligerent status.

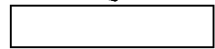
Although public endorsement of EZLN aims could spur the rebels to attempt a last-ditch push for fulfillment of their national demands, we believe the group would settle for a compromise formula. It might include some of the following elements:


- Government agreement to recognize the EZLN as a legitimate political force and to provide amnesty to rebel cadre.
- EZLN agreement to renounce violence and lay down its arms.
- An offer by Mexico City to formally consider rebel demands on national reforms, perhaps in the context of multiparty talks.
- Agreement on a package of political reforms for Chiapas that addresses indigenous concerns, possibly including changes in the state's Constitution and its judicial system.
- Rebel endorsement of government socio-economic development programs in Chiapas.

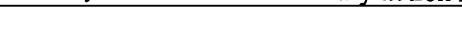
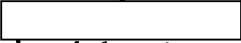
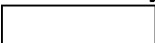
### **"No" Vote Would Hinder Talks**

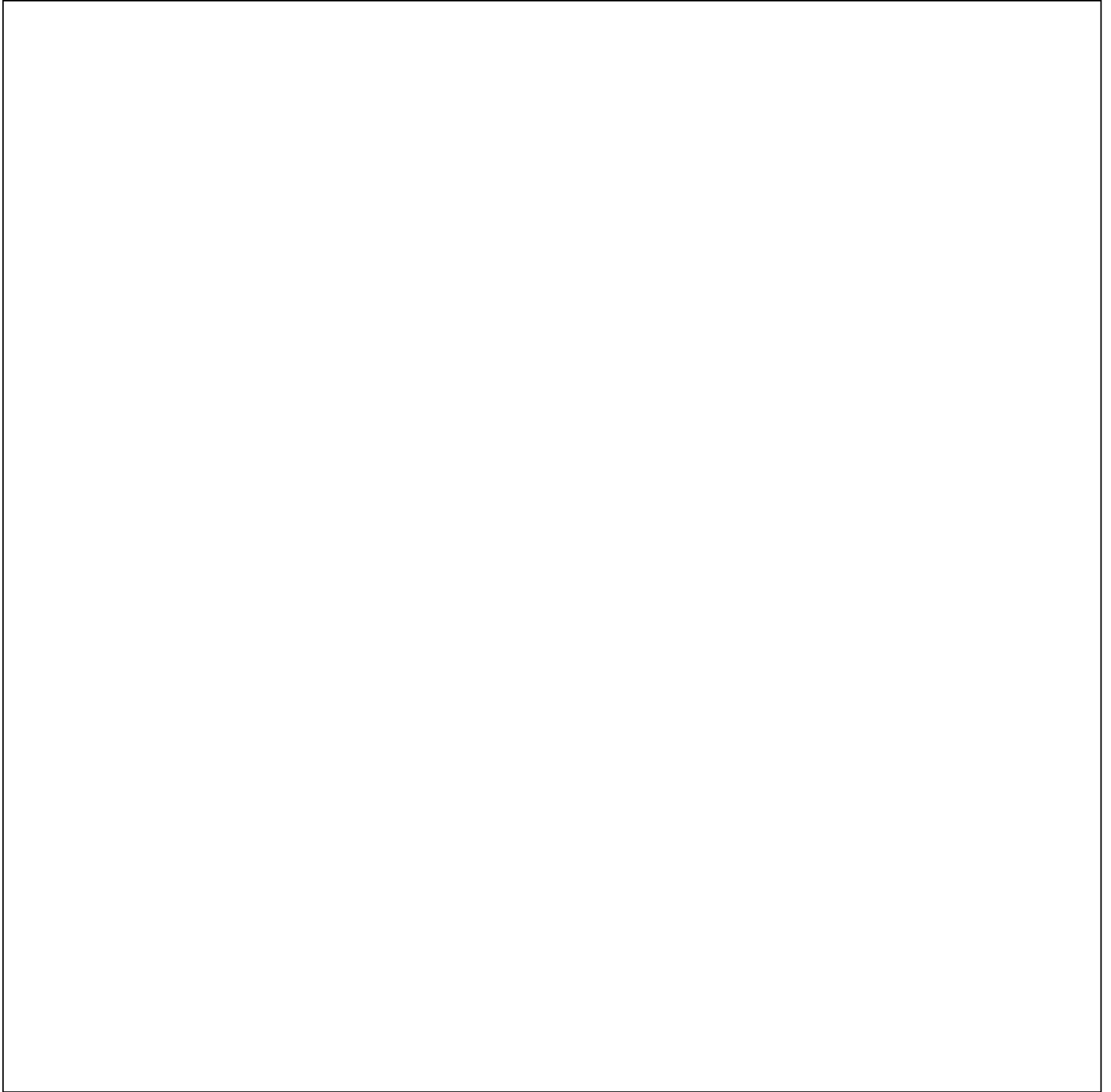
Lack of support for EZLN goals and entry into the political process would undercut Zapatista claims to a national support base, further marginalizing the group and sharply eroding prospects for an early settlement. Divisions that have slowed discussions would be likely to deepen, forcing the EZLN to reassess its options. In order to regain political momentum, we believe the Zapatistas would adopt a two-track strategy marked by:

- Renewed dialogue with the government aimed at finding a face-saving way of preserving the group's local sphere of influence.

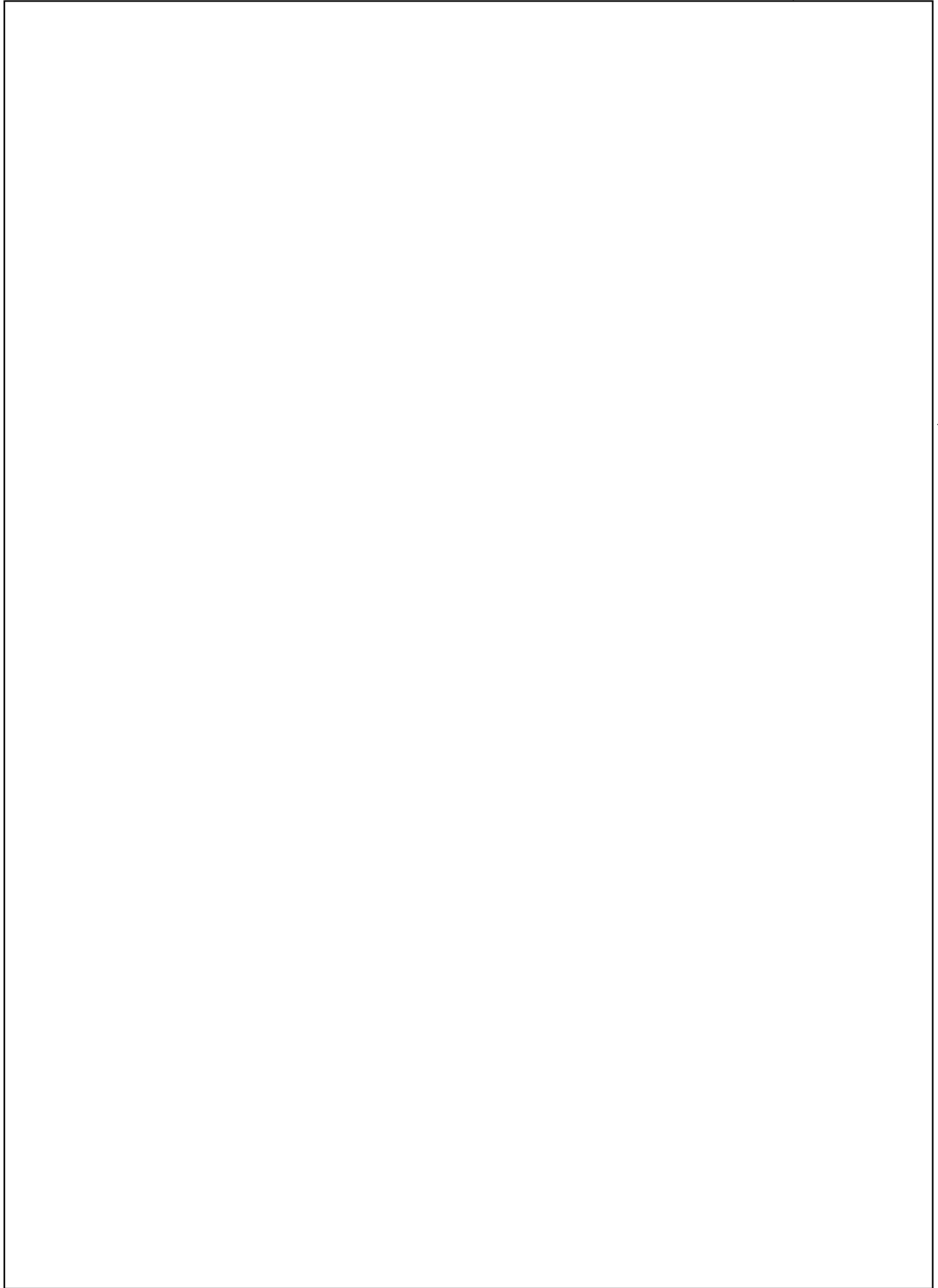
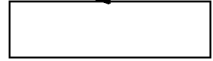


- A more militant posture--short of coordinated military action--to generate rank-and-file enthusiasm and regain credibility. For example, the rebels might use the 15 October local elections in Chiapas as an occasion to stage protests and engineer takeovers of public or private assets in support of EZLN demands. We judge it unlikely, however, that they would abandon talks altogether or attempt high-profile armed attacks on civilian or military targets that would almost certainly provoke a military crackdown. 

Although the Zedillo administration almost certainly wants to avoid military action in Chiapas, particularly until after 15 October,   tentative support to proposed military contingency plans to isolate the rebels and apprehend their leaders if peace talks fail. By late July, preparations were reportedly complete and troops were on alert to facilitate quick response to any Zapatista actions. A prolonged rebel absence from talks or fruitless dialogue, particularly if accompanied by escalating political violence and clashes over land, could persuade Mexico City that an Army crackdown would be less costly than a popular perception that the government was not in command. 



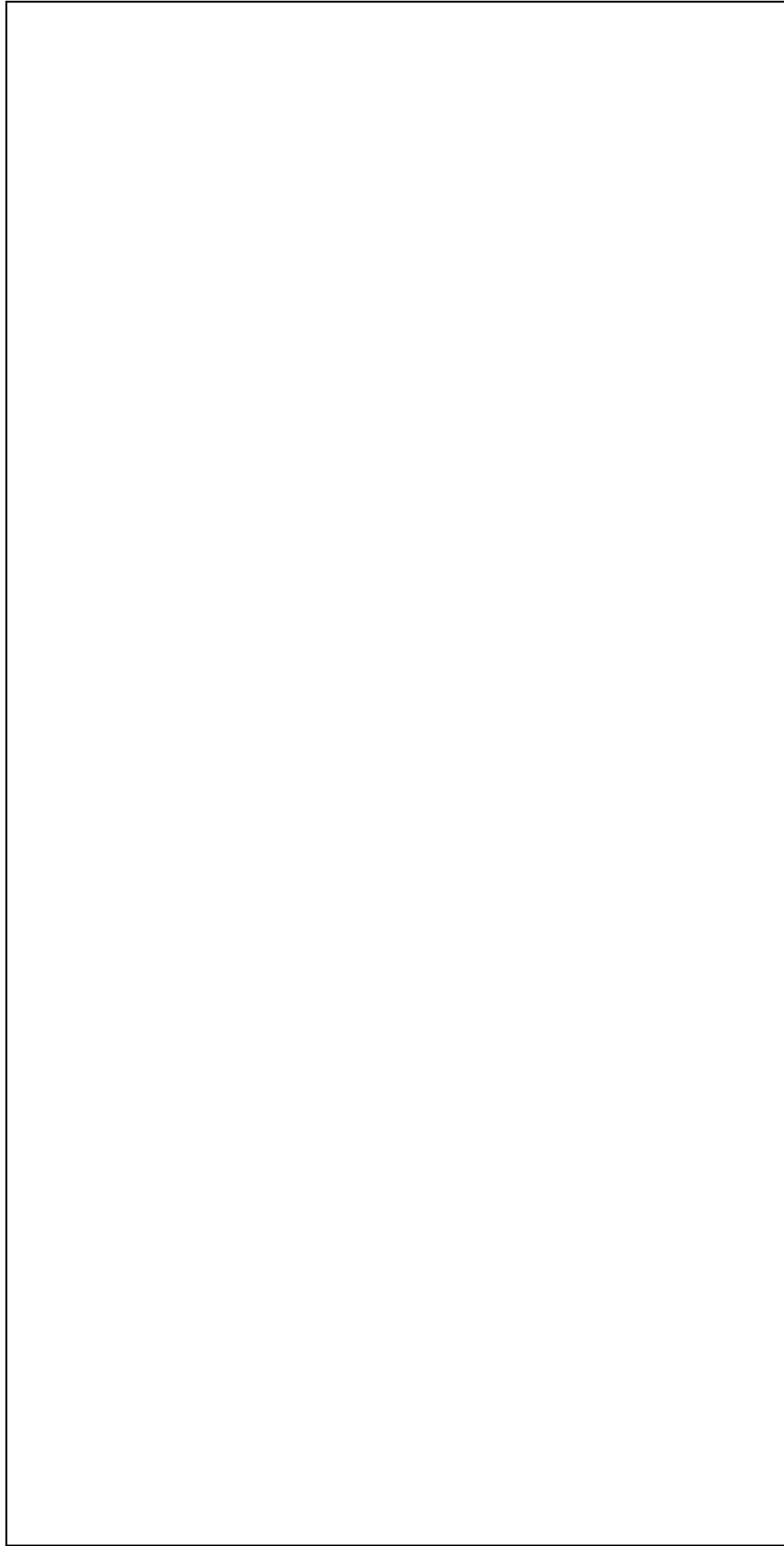
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