

## DEAR FRIENDS OF WADI

from THOMAS VON DER OSTEN-SACKEN, Managing Director



he Tigris is dying - this is how AFP recently headlined a report on the devastating water shortage in Iraq: Mesopotamia is literally drying up. For the people there, as everywhere in the Middle East, the catastrophe caused by climate change and environmental destruction that everyone is talking about these days are being felt and seen. More and more formerly agricultural land is no longer arable, leading to increased migration to the cities. The swamps in the south of the country are shrinking at an alarming rate while the region has to endure record breaking heat waves.

#### LOOMING DISASTER

It just can't go on like this for much longer, otherwise millions will lose their livelihoods - not to mention the destruction of flora and fauna that can already be seen everywhere in the region. According to the UNHCR in 2022 alone, more than 20 million climate refugees were counted, and that figure does not even include all those who have left

their villages to look for a way to make a living in the big cities. But the big cities are also bursting at the seams and the supply of water and electricity is becoming increasingly difficult. All this bad news is hard to take; it's easy to have the reaction "It's too late anyway, so why bother doing anything?".

But that is not our approach: The regions in which wadi has been active for so long now have been faced with multiple catastrophes for decades. How often has the situation seemed hopeless when the jihadist barbarians of the Islamic State controlled large parts of northern Iraq eight years ago and were able to carry out their terror there unhindered? They are largely history today and, albeit sluggishly and far too slowly, areas they devastated are being rebuilt.

#### "WOMAN, LIFE, FREEDOM"

Meanwhile, young people in Iran are protesting under the slogan "Woman, Life Freedom" with their demands for an end to the hated dictatorship, are defying the regime's security forces, who are trying with extreme brutality to beat down these demonstrations, which have now been going on for two months. As everywhere in the region, the majority of the population is younger than 30 years old and not only wants political freedom and equality, but is also very aware that their future is being gambled away. People raising the alarm are not spoilsports: the time that is left to change things is running out. The gap between the situation on the ground and the desperate efforts to stop the disaster and international responses could not be greater.

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Sure: Major events such as the Cop27 meeting in Cairo are present in the media. Tens of thousands travelled (including many lobbyists from mineral oil and car companies), to a country where the demands of the youth for a better future in 2011 continue to be brutally suppressed. It seems that Cop27 is once again about large sums of billions and prestige projects, because who would not want to adorn themselves with the label "green" these days? And unfortunately it seems that the agreements made at previous conferences, such as limiting warming to 1.5 degrees, have long since become obsolete. The new figure people are now talking about is 2.5

degrees, which, if the scenario were to occur, would make large parts of the Middle East and the eastern Levant uninhabitable.

#### ENVIRONMENT – JUMP ON A MOVING TRAIN?

So are we just jumping on the same bandwagon? Because these topics are "in" at the moment, are we trying to get our share of the cake?

The answer is: No! The fact that such campaigns and programs are now an important part of our work in both Iraq and Greece has developed organically

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from previous projects. Years ago, for example, with the successful "No to violence" campaign, the idea arose that violence was also directed against the environment and animals and that this had to be addressed. Partner schools asked our local employees for appropriate seminars and our partners in Halabja have long attached great importance to environmental protection.

#### ON SITE – WITH AND FOR THE PEOPLE

As mentioned above, this topic is of particular concern to the younger generation. Every day they are confronted with the consequences of environmental destruction and a waste of resources and know that their future is also at stake. However, there is often a lack of specific starting points for what each individual can do beyond criticism of the government and industrialised countries. This is where our projects come in: where people live and work. Because projects are only successful if they do justice to the regional conditions. Managed by staff who themselves come from the region and literally speak the language that is understood there. Not abstract ideas, but concrete improvement of living conditions are in the foreground: Our teams and those of our local partner organisations run sewing courses in remote villages and teach the women how to upcycle old clothes. This strengthens their economic independence, saves resources and creates awareness that the industrial production of cheap textiles, which are available everywhere at ridiculous prices, have devastating effects: Not only are they often made using child and forced labour in Southeast Asia and China, but also oil extraction and processing, the fashion industry is also the world's biggest polluter. In this way, Kurdish women villagers become aware that their work can also have a global impact.

#### TRADITION AND MODERNITY

At the same time, on-site seminars discuss how water and energy can be saved without making major sacrifices. Their knowledge from the past plays an important role, because after all, the economical use of resources once played an important role in Iraqi Kurdistan.



Nobody wants to go back or even glorify the hard country life, but tradition and modernity can be creatively combined in this area: In Halabja, in the recycling centre we cooperate, local staff produce furniture made of recycled plastic, the design of which resembles traditional benches is modelled on in Kurdish tea houses. These "Made in Kurdistan" products are then delivered to partner schools where the students collect plastic for the centre. Delivered by tuk-tuk drivers who earn extra income, they are no longer looked down on as "garbage"

collectors" in the urban community, but are now part of the "#GreenCityHalabja" campaign, whose logo adorns their vehicles.

#### A GREAT IDEA CATCHES ON

The fact that such a campaign can be so successful after just a few months is also due to the fact that experiences from previous ones flow into it, be it the campaign against female genital mutilation (FGM) that we have been running since 2004 or the campaign against vio-

lence in schools. And it doesn't end there; the idea was taken up in various other places in the region and also in Greece. This year we were not only able to open a second recycling centre in Kifri in Iraqi Kurdistan and start a first environmental project in one of the refugee camps in northern Iraq together with Yazidi camp residents, but also on Lesvos a similar campaign with Greek partner schools and our long-term partner there, the self-organised refugee organisation "Moria White Helmets".

We would like to thank you, dear donors, for continuing to support Wadi and for having given us the confidence that we will use your funds sensibly, even in these difficult financial times where we are all affected by rampant inflation and the crushing energy crises. Nevertheless, we ask you, because we are also affected by the crisis, to continue to support us.

In this somewhat longer newsletter we would like to give you an account of some of the projects that are possible thanks to your help. With this in mind, on behalf of all our team members and partner organisations, we wish you happy holidays and a happy new year.

IN HALABJA, IN THE RECYCLING CENTRE WE COOPERATE, LOCAL STAFF PRODUCE FURNITURE MADE OF RECYCLED PLASTIC, THE DESIGN OF WHICH RESEMBLES TRADITIONAL BENCHES IS MODELLED ON IN KURDISH TEA HOUSES

# INTERVIEW WITH BASMA ALDAKHI AND SARAH HASSAN

asma and Sarah are our two extremely dedicated and hardworking team members in Dohuk, here they share with you their personal experiences, thoughts and what they would like people to know about the work they do everyday and the challeng-

### Hello Basma and Sarah, can you tell us a little bit about yourselves?

es and successes they have had.

**Basma:** I'm Yazidi from Sinjar, I started with Wadi in October 2014. I am on the team that is working full power in Dohuk we are working to help all who need it without discrimination.

Sarah: I'm from Sinjar also Yazidi and I have been working with Wadi since 2014. 2014-2017 we were working with the women survivors from DAESH who were returning, we helped them start again, taking them to the hospital providing psychosocial assistance, helping them with paperwork and re-establishing their identities. I have to say that I feel very proud about the work we did, even though it was difficult, but the need was really there.

## I know you are working on the 'No to Violence' project, can you tell us a little bit about it?

Basma: We started with the project in 6 schools in 5 camps, it is now a successful project, that has been praised by the ministry of education, we are bringing awareness and the students and teachers and staff have benefited alot, from these trainings. There was a lot of violence in these schools, both between the students and from the teachers who were unfortunately using corporal punishment and were hitting the children for being late, or not paying attention. Our goal for the start of this project was to lower the violence rate at each school substantially.

Sara: We saw so many challenges with this project. People were literally laughing at us, they would say "how can you say not to hit the children? If we don't hit them, then how will they learn?". I mean it is the worst way you can teach children, there are so many children who are in primary one and can't write their own names! It's obvious that the traditional way is a disaster. But now that we have really been working on this topic with the schools it is getting better, we did find a way to get through,

and violence is down by about 80%. But there are two schools in Sinjar, that even though we have been working with them they are still hitting the children, and the level of education is terrible, for us, its really a disaster to see this, I mean after everything we have been through, the Genocide, and these children are our future, they deserve better education and treatment than this.

#### How has the 'No to Violence project' been received in the area where you are working?

Basma: People were very resistant, especially the educational sector, the schools were not convinced of the concept they would say "if you don't hit them, they don't learn anything" this was really the biggest challenge for us as the Wadi team. We provided alot of awareness and training and seminars to the school staff, and also to the children. We still

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face a lot of challenges, there is such an endemic problem of violence in the camps. Right now there is also a big issue of violence between the students. Most of the schools we have been working with are getting better, but we have to continue working until physical and verbal violence is not present anymore.

### It has been about 8 years since the horrific genocidal attack on Yazidis



## in Sinjar, what would you like people to know about the situation today?

Basma: Apart from the difficulties that we are facing from living in the camps, the continuing lack of security in Sinjar, and the large numbers of people kidnapped. There are also 2878 Yazidis missing. We don't know what happened to them. There has been no effort to find out what happened to them by the Iraqi government, or other governments or the UN to find out the fates of the people. Also the women who were freed or escaped from DAESH and their children who are still in Iraq live in the camps, there has been no funds set up for them to get income. They survive on donations, or charitable organisations. It's really terrible.

Sara: Our message to everyone, is to amplify Yazidi voices and the messages of Yazidi people, to defend us, and to support our voices and the IDPs voices, who for 8 years now have been surviving in tiny containers that feel like tombs, in the freezing cold and in the boiling heat, 4 metres, 8 people, no privacy, no feeling of family, we are asking for the most basic of human rights to be respected, and till now nothing.

WE ARE IDPS AND
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SARAH HASSAN

## You are also working on the environmental project, what has that been like?

**Basma:** The topic of the environment in the camps, or in the areas in general where we work, I'm sorry to say but it is a disaster. There is no interest from the government with regards to the environment, most people don't have any idea of the negative effects of pollution on their health. For example in Isyan camp there is an oil refinery nearby, and the incidence of cancer in the camp is quite high with the kind of cancer that is caused by pollution from oil production. The biggest issue in the camps is the burning of trash, plastic and other toxic materials. We went to the local municipality to try and set up better trash collection so people don't have to burn the garbage, but they were not interested in providing support for a cleaner camp. It is really frustrating, this impacts people's health. We can do all the awareness training, but until we have better investment and systems for trash either by NGOs or the government it won't really matter.

Sara: I mean when we started it was bad, they were just burning the plastic next to the school, and this is really bad for health. Maybe people see this as a trivial topic, like why are you bothering with this, as well as violence against kids. But we have to keep going and hope that we will succeed. We are IDPS and we are working for IDPs. We are this community and what we suffer from they suffer from and this allows us to connect with people and give us support.

## NO TO VIOLENCE A CAMPAIGN TO END VIOLENCE AGAINST CHILDREN IN SCHOOLS AND AT HOME

from ISIS ELGIBALI, Project support & Fundraising



iolence is a vicious cycle, it only brings more violence. When a parent or teacher hits a child, that child may act out by hitting other children, and the cycle goes on. Breaking that cycle by ending all forms of physical violence is the first step in a process that then builds to develop other forms of conflict resolution, de-escalation, as well as training teachers and parents on new non-violent ways of providing authority and guidance for children.

Violence is also omnipresent in war and crisis regions. It lives in people's memories and experiences and until it is addressed it continues to grow in families and schools.

In 2016 before we began the campaign we asked hundreds of children as part of our Playbus Playground activities what were the main issues in their lives, and consistently the answers were about fear of being hit, bullied, yelled at by teachers or their parents, girls also report being mistreated because of their gender. We also spoke extensively with teachers, social workers, parents, school administrators to understand their perspectives, how we could help them break the cycle of violence and to understand many of the issues at play in their world

Wadi Launched the 'No to Violence' campaign in 2017 the goal of the campaign is to stop violence against children in schools and at home, and to en-

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courage non-violent conflict resolution and authority for teachers and parents. This is a big task, as violence is such a engrained method of discipline, and is mostly seen as the only way. How do we change a culture of violence?

The approach of the campaign is not accusatory, our teams do not take an adversarial stance with school staff or parents, but rather take a 'clean slate' approach where they explain that the past is done, and we focus on changing behaviour and approaches going forward. There is little to gain by guilting, shaming past behaviours, most of the adults who perpetrate violence towards children, be they teachers or parents, have themselves not known anything else. They did not have access to information or tools on how to be a non-violent but effective teacher or parent.

Therefore the first step is to accept that this is 'how it was', but going forward take an active commitment to no longer using violence and fear as the tool of discipline and learning.

The first year of the project (2017-2018) only one school participated, but in that year they saw a dramatic improvement in children's behaviour and grades. The success of this pilot school was extensively covered by local Kurdish media and is highlighted in this interview with the director of the school. The results in combination with Wadi pushing for awareness and bringing the subject into the larger societal debates was that in the years since the project has become a real success, and now in 2022. 17 schools have committed themselves to stop beating and abuse of children by teachers. They became 'Violence-free schools'.

Other schools have registered to join the program. The teachers of participating schools all receive anti-violence training and extensive support. Parents are also included in non-violence and conflict resolution training sessions. In conversations and events with the children, they are encouraged to stand up for their rights, learn how to behave in the event of abuse, and where to report abuse.

Creating a space for non-violent resolution to become mainstream is a long term goal of this campaign. Our aim is that by continuing to make violence against children a 'hot button' topic on local media and on social media this pushes forward a conversation on a societal level, that helps really bring about larger societal change where this practice no longer becomes the accepted norm for raising or teaching children. Looking back on our own experiences we know that huge societal shifts can happen quite quickly, and it is our goal that this generation can break the cycle of violence and come to a place where it is no longer seen as routine, acceptable and 'the only way'.

It is important to remember that these approaches are relatively new in western countries as well, and till now not always accepted. Many of us who are 'not so old' can still remember corporal punishment in school. Although attitudes towards violence against children vary around the globe, countries that have banned the practice have often also experienced rapid societal change regarding children's rights. For example, in Germany, the law banning corporal punishment in schools was not applied at a federal level until 1983, yet today it would be unimaginable that a teacher would enforce their authority with violence. With some pressure and strong campaigning change can come quickly.



## MAKE GERMIAN GREEN! CAMPAIGN

from DOMINIK METZGER, Shred Up

arlier in the year, once the recycling centre in Halabja had opened officially, the staff there received a visit from an organisation of activist artists, by the name of Rand, from Kifri. They were

interested in the concept of small-scale local recycling as they already incorporated upcycling of waste products into much of their artwork and after a short time seeing the workshop in Halabja decided that they too wanted such a project partnership with Wadi and ShredUp. Not long after their visit, funding was secured for them by Wadi from the Canadian Embassy in Baghdad, and so was launched the "Make Garmian Green" campaign.

Garmian, meaning "hot place", is the southwestern most province of Iraqi Kurdistan. It deserves the name: it is by far the driest in the Kurdish region of Iraq. In the summer months, temperatures of 50°C, which literally makes life hell, are now regularly exceeded there. For months on end there is no precipitation and groundwater reserves are dwindling fast. Climate change has exacerbated already harsh conditions in recent years and has made growing crops or farming livestock increasingly challeng-

ing, nigh impossible. This makes people's future in the region uncertain at best or unlivable at worst.

This is precisely why it is so important to support the population in protecting the remaining nature and resources as best as possible and to raise awareness of the enormous challenges posed by climate change. Plastic pollution, although not directly correlated with the rising temperatures of climate change, is a pressing environmental issue, causing catastrophic damage on watercourses, contamination of the soil and leaching of harmful chemicals into our bodies. As it is a tangible issue, i.e., extremely visible, combating it with the grassroots collaboration of the community builds a strong network for further environmental action. For the people of Garmian, climate change is blatantly changing their lives for the worse, in real time. Empowering them to fight the environmental threat of plastic pollution helps develop a collective platform in which they can demand climate justice as well as face the challenges of climate catastrophe together.

In just a few weeks since receiving funding, thanks to the enthusiasm of our partners at Rand and because Wadi has

been active in Garmian for decades, it was possible to get the project off the ground. The first articles have already been published: "In addition to setting up a recycling centre, this project includes activities and awareness-raising campaigns to protect the environment and educate about the damage and distribution of plastic waste and its impact on water and climate," employee Bahkan Jamal told Kirkuk NOW. "The aim of this project is to protect people and the environment from the toxins of plastics and to educate the public, especially in schools, on how to use water and other resources more sparingly."

The bottles, which are made of the plastic type PET, are then to be pressed into compact bales for storage using a locally manufactured waste compactor to be able to sell them to large recycling companies later. The proceeds from the sale of the bottles will be used for future project expenses i.e., labour, electricity, and construction costs. Other plastic

types such as HDPE and PP, on the other hand, are to be processed into new products. For this purpose, plastic is shredded into granules and then melted down and shaped into various products such as jewellery, furniture or whatever else the artists of Kifri can design.

When implementing the project, care is taken to ensure that all important planning and installation steps take place in close cooperation with local actors and the city municipality, so that local identification – self-ownership – as is the case with all of our projects, is paramount.

The response to this campaign after just a few weeks speaks volumes: all local TV and radio stations have already reported and our partners at Rand are constantly receiving new requests from schools wishing to participate in the project. To further upscale the project in Garmian, to build the recycling infrastructure, further funding is needed.



# SECURITY FOR FLEEING WOMEN AND CHILDREN

from ARVID VORMANN, Project coordination



hen we arrived in Kraków at the beginning of March at the request of some Polish organisations, we found there at the hotspots, in the area

of the train station and at the border crossings, alongside thousands of Ukrainians – especially women, children and older people innumerable people willing to help and an overall rather unmanageable situation. In these first weeks of the war, women traveling alone and unaccompanied minors were particularly at risk of becoming victims of human trafficking or sexual abuse. In the meantime, unfortunately, many such cases have become known.

As in previous years with projects supporting refugees in Greece and Turkey, we were able to use our decades of experience in dealing with crisis situations in Poland to offer support and advice to activists and organisations to help them set up functioning local structures.

A system had to be set up as quickly as possible to get an overview of arrivals and offers of help and to ensure the safest possible placement. Together with our local partners, we have developed the cross-organizational initiatives #SafeAid and #HelpResponsibly.

#### **#SAFEAID - SAFETY FIRST**

First of all, the uncontrolled approach and taking of refugees by people who had not passed any background checks had to be prevented. Many people offering their help certainly meant well, but initially there was no overview of who was actually offering transport and accommodation for children and women arriving from Ukraine.

In coordination meetings with local NGOs and city employees who were ini-

tially unaware of the dangers, we helped to develop ideas and helped the actors at Kraków Central Station to create a new security and control based system. In addition, posters were printed and hung up that warned of possible dangers in Ukrainian. These measures did not harm the many people willing to help, but it was now easier to identify people with possibly dubious intentions.

Success became apparent in just a few days, after just a week the new organisation for arrivals of refugees at the train station in Poland was considered exemplary and the city administration posted on its social media: "Krakow is paving the way for a controlled and safe evacuation and sets a good example for other European cities."

But the onward journey also had to be made safer. For this reason, authorised bus drivers were registered and checked. accommodation at the destination of the journey was ensured and the legal situation in the destination country was also taken into account. All of this had to be done in the midst of a highly chaotic situation, dealing with several thousand new arrivals each day with exhausted and overworked local volunteers. In addition, there was communication between refugees, local authorities, drivers and host families across language barriers with countless ad hoc organisations and institutions.

The situation in the emergency shelters, which were hastily set up by various, often inexperienced, organisations also



gave cause for concern. This concerned above all safety aspects and protection from sexual assaults, but also hygiene – just think of the preparation of food, sanitary facilities or the many pets – and access to medical and psychological help. We have inspected several of these emergency camps and have been able to provide some advice and support improvements.

Since the willingness to help the refugees from Ukraine was so great and tens of thousands arrived in Poland every day in the first few days, there were many offers from the population to take in refugees privately. Several organisations had switched to providing these offers, but without a viable security concept. Most of the time, offers were received on one line, while these offers were passed on directly to refugees on the other. So it was not uncommon to see queries such as "I would like to have only one young woman travelling alone, if possible not over 23" and these disturbing requests initially went unnoticed.

There was a lack of very basic precautionary measures. And it didn't take long before the first cases circulated in the media: March 10: "49-year-old man raped 19-year-old Ukrainian woman whom he took in"; March 12: "Ukrainian refugees disappear. Private housing appears to be dangerous".

In meetings with local actors we have repeatedly emphasised how important security is even in such crises: It is better to sleep another night at the station than to stay with dangerous hosts.

Accommodation brokers on social media and on special online platforms in particular initially showed considerable security gaps. Similar or even greater dangers lurked here for the Ukrainians. Together with Polish IT security experts, who voluntarily made their labour available to the cause, we helped to bring the idea of "Safe Shelter" to life: a platform that conforms to data protection and is as intuitive as possible to use for organisations conducting mediation. To increase security, the system verifies the identity of the users via an external service provider. This gives employees of local NGOs a secure platform that has a wealth of different functions.

#### #HELPRESPONSIBLY: HELPING UKRAINIAN WOMEN TO HELP THEMSELVES

Our partners have often used media and social media to draw the attention of Ukrainian refugees and Polish and international volunteers to the most important security aspects. Short guides in Ukrainian were prepared for the refugees and distributed in the Ukrainian media on social media.

We also supported a chatbot and a 24/7 hotline with the Ukrainian refugee self-help group Martynka.



The hotline which helps refugees with all sorts of questions and problems, makes translations possible for the doctor or the authori-

ties and also offers or arranges psychosocial help and legal advice. Wadi made a significant contribution to the development of this hotline and helped to set up viable structures.

From the very first day of their work, the employees at Martynka faced a problem that was almost impossible to solve in Poland: unlike in Ukraine, abortions are virtually impossible there. But what should women who have been raped do in such a situation when, as DIE ZEIT wrote in an article about Martynka, they are in Poland and encounter "one of the strictest laws in the EU"? This is where Martynka comes in and "provides information about emergency contraception and abortion options in Poland and puts you in touch with doctors and lawyers." \*

<sup>\*</sup> DIE ZEIT from 10.08.2022: "Kriegsverbrechen in der Ukraine: Hilfe für Betroffene von sexualisierter Gewalt" ("War crimes in Ukraine: Help for those affected by sexualized violence")

OUR MULTIPLE STAYS
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We were pleased when, months later, "Martynka" (now a successful organisation) wrote on Instagram: "It was Wadi who paid for our first stickers and flyers, which we distributed all over Poland. Since then we have cooperated in many areas: Wadi advises us on how to prevent human trafficking and puts us in contact with other important partners."

Not only were we able to arrange partnerships with international organizations such as "Women on Web" for the founders of Martynka, they also benefited from our experience in helping and supporting victims of sexual violence. After all, Wadi helped open Iraq's first women's shelter, and we have a long history of campaigning against violence, and have helped hundreds of Yazidi

girls who escaped after being taken prisoners of the Islamic State in 2014.

Our multiple stays in both Poland and Ukraine turned out to be internationalism in the best sense: from our experiences with refugee crises and wars our new partners in Poland could benefit directly. This also filled our Iraqi and Syrian colleagues with satisfaction, who care deeply about the fate of the people in Ukraine. This applies in particular to the "Moria White Helmets" in Lesbos, Greece who had to experience for themselves in Syria what it means to be bombed by the Russian air force.

In Poland, it was never about becoming active as Wadi ourselves, so we deliberately stayed in the background. This creates trust, because local organisations often rightly fear "competition" from experienced international NGOs. As a result, there is often an atmosphere of mutual distrust that is extremely counterproductive.

We, on the other hand, are happy to now call "Martynka", "Mudita" and others our close partners who can always turn to us with questions when the need arises, while we can focus on that region again, to which we feel particularly connected: the Middle East.

A detailed report about our activities in Poland and other articles about our partners can be found on our homepage. We would also like to thank all private donors, the American Jewish Committee and Solingen hilft e. V. for their support.



At this point we would like to thank all the institutions, donors and friends who have supported our work over the years and continued to make it possible. We sincerely ask you to keep supporting us so that we can continue to implement our concept of solidary development cooperation. Because we see again and again on site: staying power is what counts, changes take time.



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The contributions signed by name reflect the views of the authors and not necessarily those of the editors

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