



# THE TAKE BACK THE LAND MOVEMENT

*Housing is a Human Right*

## The Crisis

A severe housing crisis is gripping families and communities across the United States. Since the fall of 2008, the US Government purchased millions of foreclosed properties from banks through the Troubled Asset Relief Program (TARP). These acquisitions bailed out the financial industry, which was literally on the verge of collapse.

The concrete result of the TARP bailout has been the transfer of \$1.5 trillion in public wealth into the hands of private institutions and individuals (in the form of bonuses) to preserve their fortunes. While taking money from everyday workers and handing it over to huge, too big to fail, financial institutions helped forestall the collapse of the world's financial markets, it has not prevented the displacement and dispossession of millions of ordinary families—disproportionately low-income and working class women of color. In short, the banks have been saved, but the people have been abandoned.

Because billions of dollars in public funds were used to buy these homes, we assert those homes are now public housing and must be used to solve the housing crisis by providing homes to millions of families and individuals.

## The Movement

The Land and Housing Action Group (L&HAG) of the US Human Rights Network is building a movement to fundamentally transform land relationships in this society and to elevate housing to the level of a human right.

To accomplish this objective, the L&HAG is building a network of organizations engaged in land and housing campaigns in their communities.



While studying for her PhD, Nadine Pierre was evicted from her home and became homeless. Here she is interviewed during a successful anti-eviction defense from the foreclosed home into which her and her family were placed by Take Back the Land. This story made national and international news.

The Take Back the Land Movement is directly challenging those laws which allow banks to reap record profits while millions of families face eviction and homelessness. Challenging unjust laws requires a protracted direct action campaign of civil disobedience designed to prioritize people over profits in a tangible way.

As such, the Movement focuses on defending families against eviction and “liberating” vacant government owned and foreclosed homes, moving homeless people into people-less homes.

The Take Back the Land Movement is rooted in the

following principles:

- Housing is a human right;
- Local community control over land and housing;
- Leadership by impacted communities, particularly low income women of color;
- Direct action oriented campaigns.

### **Organizational Structure**

Changing times and new challenges demand new and fresh approaches, including innovative ways of thinking about and organizing our communities.

Inspired by land reform and anti-eviction movements in South Africa and Brazil, this is a trans-local movement: a network of organizations engaged in their own local communities and campaigns, linked together by a common framework of principles, objectives and strategies to achieve those objectives.

The Take Back the Land Movement, then, is not one single national campaign, but, rather, one thousand independent, but interconnected, local campaigns directed towards the common objectives of community control over land and elevating housing to the level of a human right.

Local campaigns and actions are not directed by a centralized committee, but entirely driven by Local Action Groups (LAG), who operate independently while benefiting from shared experiences. The L&HAG facilitates communication among the LAGs and provides them with campaign and technical support.

This decentralized network model focuses power, flexibility and decision making in the hands of local impacted communities and individuals.

### **May 2010 Month of Action**

The Take Back the Land Movement is calling for a May 2010 National Month of Action.

In the spirit of the civil rights movement, in May 2010, organizations throughout the United States are organizing “live-ins” to provide housing for families by defending them against eviction or moving them into vacant government owned or foreclosed homes.

May 2010 will mark the beginning of a major social movement, one which result in housing security for millions of families.

We urge organizations and all people of good conscience to join the rising chorus calling for the elevation of housing to the level of a human right, and to do so through engagement in direct action campaigns which support that objective.

#### **Action Areas**

**Foreclosure related evictions.** In the context of the worse housing crisis in memory, evicting families and creating more vacant homes in communities is counterproductive.

**Foreclosed homes.** These homes must be filled with families in need of housing.

**Vacant foreclosed and government owned buildings.** At a time of such great need, these vacant structures shock the moral conscience. They must be used to housing people.

**Vacant foreclosed and government owned land.** Now that “boom” times are over, vacant land must now be returned to the common good.

**Public housing.** Public housing must be protected because we cannot afford to lose low-income housing.

**The right to return.** Whether through gentrification, public housing demolition or the combination of natural disasters and government actions, those forced to leave their long-time communities must have the right to return.

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#### **Land and Housing Action Group**



## The Take Back the Land Movement

### *The Movement*

#### **The Crisis and the Movement**

In the face of the most severe economic crisis in two generations, people are fighting back. Many are protesting the lack of bank lending, there is open rebellion against unfair credit card rate hikes, a burgeoning movement to divest from major banks and move assets into credit unions and community banks and a growing number of homeowners refusing to pay their predatory mortgages while demanding the banks “produce the note” and staying in their homes.

Most dramatically, a growing anti-eviction movement is directly implementing public policy by defending the right of families to remain in foreclosed homes and public housing. The effort has garnered national attention- featured in the New York Times, the Washington Post, a nationally distributed AP story, on CNN, ABC World News Tonight, PBS' NOW program and in the recent Michael Moore movie *Capitalism: A Love Story*- and is building support across the United States. This is the Take Back the Land Movement.

With the backdrop of millions of families losing their homes to foreclosures, a massive public bailout of the financial industry and skyrocketing unemployment, the general public is compelled to rethink and reconsider the dominant paradigms and assumptions about the world around them, including their relationship to housing, the proper function of government, the role of large financial institutions and their own responsibility for each other and, indeed, the world.

As a direct consequence of the rethinking, this society is on the cusp of a major social movement and transformation, the likes of which have not been experienced in the US since the Civil Rights era. More than the opportunity to change one law or alter a series of regional practices, there exists the potential to fundamentally transform this society, in

far reaching ways, in the areas of land relationships and housing.

This confluence of factors represents a unique historical opportunity for the social justice movement to articulate a well developed vision of the way things can be to a newly captive audience, and to meaningfully engage in the process of transforming this society.

The potential exists to fundamentally transform land relationship, in this society and in our lifetime, and in doing so, elevate housing to the level of a human right. Towards this objective, we are building the Take Back the Land Movement.

#### **A Trans-local Network**

Changing times and new challenges demand new and fresh approaches, including innovative ways of thinking about and organizing our communities. Inspired by anti-eviction campaigns in South Africa, Take Back the Land is a trans-local movement: a network of organizations engaged in their own local communities and campaigns, linked together by a common framework of principles, objectives and strategies to achieve those objectives.

The Take Back the Land Movement, then, is not one single national campaign, but, rather, one thousand independent, but interconnected, local campaigns directed towards the common objectives of community control over land and elevating housing to the level of a human right.

Local campaigns and actions are not directed by a centralized committee, but entirely driven by Local Action Groups (LAG), who operate independently while benefiting from shared experiences.

The Land & Housing Action Group (L&HAG), of the US Human Rights Network, facilitates communication among the LAGs and provides them

## The Take Back the Land Movement • The Movement



The Chicago Anti-Eviction Campaign defends Lenise Forrest from eviction from public housing.

with campaign and technical support.

This decentralized network model focuses power, flexibility and decision making in the hands of local impacted communities and individuals.

This historic opportunity to fundamentally transform land relationships in this society, thereby elevating housing to the level of a human right, will only be realized through prolonged and rigorous public policy campaigns and legislative initiatives, propelled by a critical mass of trans-local direct action civil disobedience campaigns, specifically, liberating vacant government owned and foreclosed homes and defending families from foreclosure and public housing related evictions.

Realizing the unique potential of this moment demands new thinking in forging a comprehensive and robust movement. This movement will make effective use of both traditional mass media as well as new social networking tools, to frame and present the concept of housing as a human right and inspire a new generation of social justice actors.

The Take Back the Land Movement is defined by common framework of **principles**, **objectives** and **strategies** to achieve those objectives.

### Principles

The Take Back the Land Movement is rooted in the following principles:

1. Housing is a human right.
2. Local community control over land and housing.
3. Leadership by impacted communities, particularly low income women of color.
4. Direct action oriented campaigns.

### Objectives

As with each one before, this movement will be defined by the social objectives it articulates, and judged by the extent to which those objectives are achieved. While protests and other actions will prove exciting and effective at dramatizing injustice, the mechanics of social transformation involve translating theory into practice and ideals into concrete, achievable objectives.

Objectives exist on three levels: Movement objectives, campaign objectives and action objectives.

The overarching objective of the Take Back the Land Movement correlate significantly with our principles:

- Fundamentally transform land relationships;
- Elevate housing to the level of a human right;
- Community control over land and housing;
- Empower impacted communities, particularly low income communities of color.

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## The Take Back the Land Movement - The Movement

In order to achieve these movement objectives, we must design and implement a series of campaigns, whose objectives support those of the broader movement. A campaign, for example, designed to win a moratorium on evictions, directly supports the broader movement objectives of housing as a human right, although, by itself, the campaign does not achieve that broader objective.

Campaigns often focus on achieving mid-range objectives, such as shifts in public policy or specific laws. Campaigns to support the broader movement objectives might focus on winning a series of policy shifts in a number of areas. Some public policy areas include:

- Establishing the human right to housing under law;
- Keep families in their homes;
- Utilize vacant land, homes and buildings;
- Protect public housing;
- Community control over land and housing;
- Right to return;
- Financial institution reform;
- Build and Strengthen Alternative Democratic Institutions;

Local Action Groups develop and pursue specific legislative or behavioral demands inside of one or more of the policy areas from the local, state or federal government, housing agencies, bank or other financial institutions, land speculators or other appropriate targets.

Where a movement is comprised of a series of campaigns, a campaign can be comprised of a series of actions, including protests, letter writing, legislative proposals, teach-ins and direct action.



Take Back the Land moved the Trody family back into the home from which they were evicted and then successfully defended them from another eviction. The defense was featured in the movie *Capitalism: A Love Story*.

While actions are designed to support a campaign, and to advance the objectives of that campaign, each specific action has its own specific and unique objectives. That means an action often has at least two objectives: a campaign objective and an immediate or action objective.

For example, a campaign to win an eviction moratorium might include any number of actions, such as a teach in about the economic and housing crisis, a petition drive calling for the moratorium and a direct action to defend a family facing eviction. The immediate or action objective is to stop the eviction of the family from the home. However, if the action is successfully and the family is allowed to remain in the home, the campaign is not over, because the action is also demanding an eviction moratorium beyond the one family.

When developing campaigns and actions, the L&HAG urges organizations to consider designing campaigns which support the broader movement objectives, and actions which support campaign objectives.

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To reiterate, while the Land & Housing Action Group is proposing a broad framework of objectives and public policy areas, campaigns and actions must be developed and executed by appropriate Local Action Groups.

### Campaign Strategies

The direct action component of Take Back the Land style campaigns focus on:

- **Foreclosure related evictions.** In the context of the worse housing crisis in memory, evicting families and creating more vacant homes in communities is counterproductive.
- **Foreclosed homes.** The economic and housing crisis has resulted in perfectly good homes sitting vacant, for years on end, devaluing entire neighborhoods and transferring to the ownership of banks that already have been paid for the homes by the federal bailout. These homes must be filled with families in need of housing.
- **Vacant foreclosed and government owned buildings.** As the homeless sleep in the streets, cars and parks, vacant buildings, owned by banks and local governments, dot the urban skyline and shock the moral conscience. These structures must be put to use for the benefit of people in need of housing.
- **Vacant foreclosed and government owned land.** During the housing “boom,” local governments made publicly owned land available to politically connected developers at fire sale prices. Now that boom times are over, vacant land must now be returned to the common good.
- **Public housing.** Even as the housing crisis intensifies, municipalities across the country are shedding public housing units through

demolition, deliberate vacancy and privatization. In this time of great need, we cannot afford to lose low-income housing. Public housing must be protected and expanded and people must not be evicted for lack of income.

- **The right to return.** Whether through gentrification, public housing demolition or the combination of natural disasters and government actions, large numbers of people have been forced to leave their long-time communities. People must have the right to return to historic communities and rebuild them when disasters occur.

In the broadest sense, the strategy is to overwhelm the status quo with a critical mass of Take Back the Land style actions, whose local campaigns and victories result in a social transformation of land relationships.



Mary Trody celebrates after Take Back the Land successfully moves her and her family back into the home from which they were foreclosed and evicted.

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### Land and Housing Action Group



## The Take Back the Land Movement

### *Organizational Structure*

The Take Back the Land Movement is not an organization or national campaign, it is a trans-local network of organizations engaged in autonomous campaigns tied together by a common objective: elevating housing to the level of a human right.

Under this organizational model, social transformation is not achieved through a single national campaign, but, rather, through a critical mass of interconnected and mutually supportive local campaigns. The power of the Take Back the Land Movement, then, is focused on the decentralized Local Action Groups, not a national organization or campaign.

Therefore, we are not building one national campaign, we are building a movement of one thousand local campaigns- a network of interconnected trans-local campaigns, dedicated to elevating housing to the level of a human right.

As such, network organizations communicate and coordinate, but are not centrally controlled. That means campaign decisions are fundamentally made by organizations on the local level, while the coordinating body provides a broad framework-with meaningful input from member organizations-facilitates communication and coordination among member organizations and provides those organizations with campaign and technical support.

In addition to promoting a quicker and lighter decision making process- essential to any successful movement in this day and time- the trans-local network model empowers those most impacted by the crisis.

As organizations or coalitions become national, low income people- particularly people of color- are further removed from the decision making process of the campaigns impacting their lives. Because Take Back the Land campaigns are driven by Local

Action Groups, not a national coordinating body, impacted communities assert the primary voice in the decision making process and organizations are better able to employ locally appropriate campaign strategies and tactics, consistent with the broader framework of principles and objectives, while simultaneously drawing on their connection to other communities doing the same.

The Take Back the Land Movement is organized into three parts: The network is coordinated by the **Land & Housing Action Group** of the US Human Rights Network; the Movement is driven by **Local Action Groups**, local organizations which support of the principles and objectives of the Movement; and technical and support services, such as legal support, training, research, etc., are provided by **Strategic Partners**.

#### **Land & Housing Action Group (L&HAG)**

The Take Back the Land Movement is coordinated by the Land and Housing Action Group (L&HAG) of the US Human Rights Network (USHRNetwork.org).

Due to historic exploitation and oppression and the nature of the current housing crisis, the L&HAG is explicitly comprised of Black political leadership. The L&HAG has committed to achieving leadership consisting of at least 51% Black women. This commitment is that of the L&HAG and is not required of Local Action Groups. As of this writing, this objective has not been realized. The L&HAG asks social justice forces to respect Black political leadership. The L&HAG is expanded on an as needed basis.

The L&HAG has three (3) key functions:

- 1). Movement Framework.** Develop the framework of principles, objectives and strategies which define the Take Back the Land Movement.

**2). Movement Building.** Coalesce a network of Local Action Groups, engaged in local campaigns, and Strategic Partners, offering specific skill sets, such as legal or policy experience.

The L&HAG Movement Building activities involves at least three (3) components:

- 1) Identifying and reaching out to potential Local Action Groups and Strategic Partners;
- 2) Network coordination, including scheduling coordination calls, resource allocation, developing media opportunities, facilitating communications and problem solving among Local Action Groups; and
- 3) Resource generation to provide for the material needs associated with coordinating a trans-local movement.

**3). Campaign Support.** Provide Local Action Groups with the information, technical skills and general support needed to engage in direct action campaigns and win local victories. The L&HAG's role not to dictate local campaigns, but rather to ask Local Action Groups “what is your campaign and how can we help make it successful?”

As such, The L&HAG supports Local Action Groups by providing them with:

- **Training.** Direct action training specifically catered to meet the particular needs of the local campaign;
- **Technical Support.** Campaign development and other support required to advance a successful campaign or action;
- **Access.** Access to other organizations in the Network facing similar campaign challenges and

Strategic Partners able to assist with a range of technical issues, such as legal advice and research;

### **Local Action Groups (LAG)**

Local Action Groups (LAG) are the power center of the Take Back the Land Movement. LAGs develop and execute local campaigns and connect the concept of housing as a human right to the human beings impacted by land and housing issues.



A Nkwalini community meeting in the rural Zulu Land territory of South Africa. Meetings of the land reform and anti-eviction organization Abahlali baseMjondolo are run by local communities, who make their own decisions and then inform the main organization, not the other way around.

What does it mean for an organization to become a LAG of the Take Back the Land Movement? The core responsibilities include:

- Engage in a “Take Back the Land” style campaign or action of housing liberation or anti-eviction defense;
- Frame campaign concepts in terms of “housing as a human right” and “community control over land and housing”;
- Publicly identify campaigns with the Take

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### **Land and Housing Action Group**



Back the Land Movement, connecting it, where possible, with other LAGs;

- Allow the L&HAG and other LAGs to publicly identify the organization as part of the Movement;
- Participate in national conference calls, as organizational capacity permits;
- Report back on campaign actions, successes and challenges to the rest of the Network so that other LAGs can benefit from your experiences;
- Participate in regional trainings and gatherings, as organizational capacity permits;
- Share knowledge and experience with other LAGs, as organizational capacity permits;
- Make a good faith effort to engage in the May 2010 month of action;

Organizations are recognized as LAGs once they sign and return a Memorandum of Understanding, defining the terms of the relationship. LAGs should assign a staff person or member to serve as contact person with the L&HAG.

LAGs are not part of a single national campaign, as traditionally understood, but, rather, connecting their own local campaign to others similar struggles. Local organizational work can include:

**Community Organizing.** Organizing and empowering communities adversely impacted by the economic and housing crisis.

**Campaigns.** Organize campaigns designed to win concrete action objectives (e.g. stopping an eviction) and broader campaign objectives (e.g. eviction moratorium, community control over housing, etc.).

**Community Development.** People-centered economic development.



Families in the New Fields community of Western Cape Town, South Africa, prepare to defend homes from eviction. Organizations, such as the Western Cape Anti-Eviction Campaign and Abahlali baseMjondolo in Durban, feature a decentralized organizational structure where the power lies in local communities, not in the national or regional organization.

While each organization is free to engage in their own programs, campaigns and actions, LAGs must engage in Take Back the Land style campaigns and actions- housing “liberations” and eviction defense.

### **Strategic Partners**

While the core and power of the Take Back the Land Movement resides in the LAGs, building a vibrant movement requires support from other social justice forces, those with access to resources and technical skills.

As part of the comprehensive effort to fundamentally transform land relationships and elevate housing to the level of a human right, the Take Back the Land Movement is engaging the participation of Strategic Partners to provide support services to LAGs and the L&HAG.

Strategic Partners can include NGOs, legal services, social service organizations, movement support organizations, educational institutions, departments

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### **Land and Housing Action Group**

inside of educational institutions and even individuals.

The role of Strategic Partners is to provide a range of specific technical and support services to the Take Back the Land Movement, at the direction of LAGs and as coordinated by the L&HAG. Strategic Partners are recognized as such by signing a Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) with the L&HAG defining the terms, rights and responsibilities of the partnership.

Technical areas which might require Strategic Partners include:

- **Movement Building.** Building and maintaining a national network of member LAGs and Strategic Partners. Coordinating meetings, events and work responsibilities among affiliated organizations, individuals and institutions. This is a coordination, not leadership, function.
- **Public Policy and Legislative Initiative.** Developing specific public policy and legislative initiatives in each of the 50 states and in countless counties and cities in those states.
- **Research.** Researching economic trends, statistics, laws and history all help properly inform those engaged in the movement on the ground.
- **Resource Generation.** Grant searches and proposal writing, organizing fundraisers, building donor relationships, securing in-kind contributions, organizing volunteers and developing other resource streams.
- **Legal Support.** Researching specific foreclosure, eviction and public housing laws; coordinating legal representation; providing direct legal representation for LAGs, their members and the families they assist; research best laws and practices locally, nationally and internationally.
- **Direct Action Training.** Train LAGs in direct action strategies and tactics, as well as technical aspects of civil disobedience and other high impact

actions.

- **Media Support.** Cultivate relationships and opportunities with traditional media and develop social media, such as websites, social networking sites and self-published articles, books and multi media pieces, such as videos.
- **Social Services.** Provide a range of social services to families in need.
- **Alternative Structures.** Design and implement alternative democratic structures and institutions, such as land trusts, community development corporations, co-ops, management organizations, credit unions and others.

We believe that a decentralized, bottoms up and highly focused movement, which connects local grassroots struggles and supporters of those struggles, can support protracted social engagement and, ultimately, the elevation of housing to the level of a human right.



The Take Back the Land sign from the Umoja Village Shantytown in Miami, Florida.

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## The Take Back the Land Movement

*May 2010 Month of Action*

### The Housing Crisis

On the heels of a multi-billion dollar public bailout of the financial sector, major banks and financial institutions are enjoying near record profits, with executives taking home multi-million dollar bonuses.

At the same time, those very same banks continue to foreclose on and evict tens of thousands of families from their homes, families without access to federal bailouts and taxpayer subsidized bonuses.

Families and, indeed, entire communities, are devastated by the deepening economic crisis and the impact of that crisis on housing security. Low income communities of color, particularly women in those communities, are disproportionately impacted.

The financial industry, and the government which supports that industry, will not solve this crisis.

### May 2010 Month of Action

To address the land and housing crisis, as well as the enormous transfer of wealth from the public to private financial institutions through the government bailout, the Take Back the Land Movement is calling for a May 2010 national month of action.

The objectives of the month of action are to:

- house people;
- stop evictions; and
- build momentum for the long term struggle to elevate housing to the level of a human right.

The actions will focus on foreclosure related evictions; income related public housing evictions; vacant foreclosed homes; vacant government owned and public housing; vacant government owned and foreclosed buildings; vacant government owned and foreclosed land; and the right to return.



Members of Take Back the Land prepare to “liberate” a foreclosed home for a family.

Inspired by the sit-ins of the civil rights era, in May 2010, Local Action Groups throughout the country are organizing a locally led decentralized series of “live-ins.” Live-in actions provide families with housing by moving them into vacant government or foreclosed homes or defending families from foreclosure or public housing related evictions.

The May 2010 Live-ins affirm the human right to housing by directly challenging the unjust policies and laws which allow banks to be bailed out for their foreclosed homes, while, simultaneously, allowing those same banks to evict families- the same people who financed the bank bailout in the first place. We challenge the reality that the government guarantees financial institution profits, but does not guarantee human beings housing.

The reality is that the banks do not need hundreds of thousands of vacant homes to survive, but human beings do. Therefore, in May 2010, organizations across the US will assert the human right to housing by directly challenging the laws and practices that protect taxpayer subsidized bank properties at the expense of families, by organizing campaigns of housing “liberation” and home defense.

Take Back the Land asserts that it is immoral to



allow- even financially reward- banks to maintain hundreds of thousands of vacant homes while human beings sleep on the street. While campaigns of openly breaking laws in order to challenge their legitimacy are historically called “civil disobedience,” this Movement is not merely challenging immoral policies, but actively enforcing moral ones, by housing human beings.

Therefore, the May 2010 Month of Action is not one of civil disobedience, but of “moral obedience.”

The May 2010 Month of Action will make effective use of social networking and mass media to highlight participating actions and frame the concept of housing as a human right. Stories of sympathetic families will be brought into the homes of millions through these actions and the media coverage they generate.

The Month of Action will be followed by the US Social Forum in Detroit, Michigan, and an anticipated expansion of the Local Action Groups in the Take Back the Land network.

May 2010 is not the totality or end of the movement- it is only the beginning.

### **The Take Back the Land Movement**

Housing is a fundamental human right protected by Article 25 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR), Article 11 of the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (CESCR), and Article 5 of the International Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination (CERD), amongst others.

This right in theory, however, has not been translated to practice. In order to realize housing as a human right, we must build a movement to take

back the land.

The Take Back the Land Movement, is not one single centrally controlled national campaign, but, rather, one thousand decentralized independent, but interconnected, local campaigns directed towards the common objectives of community control over land and elevating housing to the level of a human right.

The Take Back the Land Movement is a trans-local Network of organizations engaged in land and housing campaigns in their local communities. Members of the network are known as Local Action Groups. The network is facilitated by the Land & Housing Action Group of the US Human Rights Network.

Organizations interested in joining the Take Back the land Movement should contact the Land & Housing Action Group at [USHRNetwork.org](http://USHRNetwork.org).



The community rallies to defend the Umoja Village Shantytown, a squatter settlement on vacant land in the city of Miami.

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