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Double Six Tragedy and Implications of Political Development in Sabah, Malaysia

ABSTRACT: On June 6, 1976, Malaysians were shocked by a plane crash killing the top ranks leaders of the newly appointed state government of Sabah, Malaysia. The Australian-made aircraft types NOMAD plane crashed in the village of Sembulan Baru, which is located two miles away from the International Airport and the city of Kota Kinabalu. "Double Six" tragedy on June 6, 1976 in Sabah, Malaysia has resulted in widespread dissemination of conspiracy theory. This crash killed all the people on board, including Tun Mohd Fuad Stephens, who has been shortly appointed as the Chief Minister of Sabah. The sudden death of Tun Mohd Fuad Stephens created opportunity for Datuk Mohd Harris Salleh to be appointed as the Chief Minister of Sabah. This paper seeks and analyses the causes behind the crash which remain unknown. This paper applies also the historical method analysis, comprising an analysis of the most pertinent documents. In addition, this paper presents the views of high profile individual such as Datuk Mohd Harris Salleh and Toh Puan Hajjah Rahimah Stephens how events can occur. However, writer strongly agree with Datuk Harris Salleh and Toh Puan Hajjah Rahimah Stephens that "human error" was a major factor of "Double Six" tragedy.

KEY WORD: Double six tragedy, crash, Chief Ministers of Sabah, human errors, technical errors, and conspiracy theory.

RESUME: Kertas kerja ini bertajuk "Tragedi Double Six dan Implikasi terhadap Perkembangan Politik di Sabah, Malaysia". Pada 6 Jun 1976, rakyat Malaysia telah dikejutkan oleh nahas sebuah pesawat udara yang mengorbankan seorang pemimpin kerajaan Sabah yang baru dilantik. Pesawat udara jenis NOMAD buatan Australia telah jatuh di Kampong Sembulan Baru, dua batu jauhnya dari Lapangan Terbang Antarabangsa dan Kota Kinabalu. Berlakunya peristiwa "Double Six" pada 6 Jun 1976 di Sabah, Malaysia telah mengundang pelbagai penafsiran terhadap punca-punca nahas. Peristiwa ini menyebabkan semua anak kapal terbunuh, termasuk Tun Mohd Fuad Stephens yang ketika itu menjawat jawatan Ketua Menteri Sabah. Kematian Tun Mohd Fuad Stephens telah memberi peluang kepada Datuk Mohd Harris Salleh apabila beliau dilantik sebagai Ketua Menteri Sabah. Kertas kerja ini berusaha mengenal pasti faktor-faktor berlakunya nahas dengan menggunakan pendekatan sejarah serta bergantung sepenuhnya kepada analisis dokumen. Selain itu, kertas kerja ini juga mengemukakan pandangan beberapa orang tokoh seperti Datuk Harris Salleh dan Toh Puan Hajjah Rahimah Stephens bagaimana galuran peristiwa boleh berlaku. Walau bagaimanapun, penulis bersetuju sangat dengan pandangan Datuk Mohd Harris Salleh dan Toh Puan Hajjah Rahimah Stephens bahawa "kesilapan manusia" adalah punca utama nahas dalam tragedi "Double Six".

KATA KUNCI: Tragedi double six, nahas, Ketua-ketua Menteri Sabah, kesilapan manusia, kerosakan teknikal, dan teori konspirasi.

INTRODUCTION

On June 6, 1976, Malaysians were shocked by a plane crash killing the top ranks leaders of the newly appointed state government of Sabah, Malaysia. The Australian-made aircraft types NOMAD plane crashed in the village of Sembulan Baru, which is located two miles away from the International Airport and the city of Kota Kinabalu. The crash killed everyone on board, including Tun Mohd Fuad Stephens (Chief Minister); Datuk Salleh Sulong (Minister of Finance,

Sabah); Datuk Peter Mojuntin; Chong Thian Vun; Darius Binion; and seven other crewmembers (*Kinabalu Sabah Times*, 7/6/1976:1).

This incident occurred just 52 days after the BERJAYA (*Bersatu Rakyat Jelata Sabah*) party won the Sabah Legislative Assembly election on 14 April 1976. The BERJAYA party won by the majority of 28 seats, over than USNO (United Sabah National Organization) party. BERJAYA contest in 48 seats, while the USNO contested in 40 seats, and 8 seats

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Table 1
 Members of BERJAYA Government Cabinet, 1976

Position	Incumbent
Chief Minister	Tun Mohd Fuad Stephens
Deputy Chief Minister	Datuk Mohd Harris Salleh
Minister for Local Government	Datuk Peter Mojuntin
Minister of Public Works	Chong Thian Vun
Minister of Finance	Datuk Salleh Sulong
Minister of Agriculture and Fisheries	Datuk James Ongkili
Minister of Youth and Sports	Datuk Pengiran Osman Rauf
Minister of Environment	Yap Pak Leong
Minister of Social Welfare	Datuk Sufian Koroh
Assembly Speaker	Abdul Momin Kalakhan

(Source: *The Daily Express*, 20 April 1976, p.5).

the SCA (Sabah Chinese Association). Other parties contested in election candidate from PEKEMAS (*Parti Keadilan Masyarakat Malaysia* or Social Justice Party of Malaysia) and BERSATU (Sabah United) party with 11 and 3 seats respectively (<http://www.spr.gov.my/laporan/1976/sabah76.html>, 8/1/2004 and 3/12/2012).

The victory of BERJAYA party gave the state leadership to Tun Mohd Fuad Stephens replace USNO government under leadership of Tun Mustapha. The BERJAYA government appointed various ethnic groups, represent the indigenous Muslims people, indigenous non-Muslim, and Chinese community in the state cabinet (Kem Pen Malaysia, 1976:52; and NSTP-RIS, 1990). More details about Sabah cabinet members in the government of BERJAYA are as follows (see table 1).

The newly appointed above represented from the multi-ethnic population. The appoints also to fulfill the manifestos of BERJAYA as promised in election campaign. A listed names among the non-Muslim society were Datuk Peter Mojuntin, Chong Thian Vun, Datuk James Ongkili, and several others brought in the Sabah State Cabinet.

THE BRIGHT MORNING IN KOTA KINABALU

On the morning of June 6, 1976, Tun Mohd Fuad Stephens looked happy, there was no sign of inconvenience appear on his face. Different from his usual self, Tun Mohd Fuad Stephens did not say anything about

his newly set up administration, instead he had a lot to ask about his children education.

Tun Mohd Fuad Stephens asked more about the educational progress of his children, because Asgari, Fauziah, Faridah, and Affendi still in primary and secondary school education. During breakfast, Tun Mohd Fuad Stephens joked with his wife, saying on flesh and, therefore, he want to practiced exercises include running race with people (interview with Toh Puan Hajjah Rahimah Stephens, 21/2/2004).

At 8.00 am, Tun Mohd Fuad Stephens with several of his Cabinet Members and the Sabah State Government Officials joint the people in walkathon from Tanjung Aru Beach to Kota Kinabalu. Later, Tun Mohd Fuad Stephens with his three other Sabah Cabinet Ministers rushed to Labuan, to attend an official opening ceremony of the oil refineries, with estimate crowd cost RM (Ringgit Malaysia) 100 million. He was also accompanied by his eldest son, Johari Tun Fuad (Syed Ibrahim, 1976).

A day earlier (June 5, 1976), Tun Mohd Fuad Stephens was in Labuan to welcome the arrival of the Malaysia Minister of Finance and Petroleum, Tengku Razaliagh Hamzah. Due the factory opening ceremonial involved the state and federal government, Tun Mohd Fuad Stephens present again on the next day (June 6, 1976) to rejoin the ceremony (Syed Ibrahim, 1976).

After the ceremony, Tun Mohd Fuad Stephens was scheduled to take a flight from Labuan at 5.00 pm. However, due to certain things that need to be attended in Kota

Kinabalu, he decided to depart 3.00 pm, two hours earlier than scheduled (Syed Ibrahim, 1976).

Tun Mohd Fuad Stephens flight, took around 50 minutes from Labuan. Australian-made NOMAD aircraft not having any problems along the way and have already reached at the Kota Kinabalu International Airport airspace. Nevertheless, when the aircraft in space and wait for landing instructions, suddenly the plane is spinning quickly and exploded before crashed (Campbel, 1986).

Meanwhile, Datuk Mohd Harris Salleh, Tengku Razaliegh Hamzah, and Datu Patinggi Abdul Rahman Yaakob had a different program. They were on board to Banggi Island, Kudat to visit the Cattle Breeding Centre. After receiving a news of the accident, the group rushed to Kota Kinabalu. There were a rumors, claiming that Tengku Razaliegh Hamzah was killed in the crash. When Tengku Razaliegh Hamzah himself informed the Prime Minister, Datuk Hussein Onn, via telephone that he was not on board, the rumor was stopped (Syed Ibrahim, 1976).

Datuk Mohd Harris Salleh, who took over the post as acting head of state, invited a delegation from Kuala Lumpur and Sarawak using by PIPER aircraft. A military sent to the area to control the traffic. The location was closed to the public. Meanwhile, the Department of Civil Aviation (DCA) had closed the airspace to control the situation. People also flocked to the scene, watching from a distance. To honor those who died, the state government announced the day of mourning for 40 days (Syed Ibrahim, 1976).

DOUBLE SIX TRAGEDY

In order to get a more detail account of the accident, the author has interviewed two villagers who were the eyewitness. Haji Wan Ahmad Wan Jaafar (Pak Haji Wan) and Halimah Abdullah from Kg. Sembulan, Kota Kinabalu. Pak Haji Wan was a retired civil servant who originally came from Kedah and has been living in the village for more than 40 years. Pak Haji Wan Ahmad narrated as follows:

Since the day is the weekend, I decided to stay home and slept alone. I remember the date is on 6/6/1976. The late afternoon call to prayer resounded from the State Mosque clearly heard, while clock on the wall shows the hours 3.45 pm.

Because there are so tired, I fell asleep for the second time. About five minutes later, I heard the sound of the roar of jet engines to hover just above the roof of my house. At first, I just thought it was normal flight training done on every weekend. At minute 3:50 pm, all of a sudden I heard a sound so powerful it shook the bed of my house. I immediately eyeing the house room window and saw a light aircraft frame anchored in shallow water just 100 meters from my house.

I could look and see the inscription "NOMAD" on the tail plane. I find that a plane had crashed. Not until ten minutes seems thousands of people who tried to approach the scene. Once arriving at the scene, I could see some people are carrying the body to the side as the crash happened was in shallow areas. I rushed up to the first funeral of deceased Syed Hussein Wafa, a senior State Economic Planning Unit.

I was so overwhelmed and choked upon seeing the body was so soft as if a pair of shirts. Bodies that I saw my second body of Corporal Mohd Said bodyguard to Tun Fuad who is black colored rags. As the police had already arrived and tried to crowd into the crash, so I returned to the Afternoon Prayer. At 6.30 pm, my neighbor informed that those killed were 11 people. There are many items, including money distributed as Finance Minister, Datuk Salleh Sulong, been involved.

Actually in the early morning at 8.00 am, Tun Fuad contest walk along with people in Kota Kinabalu. At 10.00 am, he to Labuan for the opening ceremony of oil refineries worth RM 100 million with the federal Finance Minister, Tengku Razaliegh Hamzah. Given his time came, he asked accelerated flight although the original flight is at 5.00 pm. He had boarded the aircraft along with 10 other crew members. The airplane should be boarded by six people but delayed by 11 people. I assume more load is a key factor crash (interview with Haji Wan Ahmad Wan Jaafar, 7/8/2001 and 22/8/2003).

Halimah Abdullah, who lived in the same village, described her experience during this shocking accident as follows:

The evening's I was watching TVs, suddenly heard a loud explosion above. Coincidentally, a neighbor who happens to hang fabric in home saw firsthand how the aircraft turned around in space before crashing exploding from the

top and anchored at sea. I do not dare say anything, that's my experience (interview with Halimah Abdullah, 25/8/2003).

Halimah Abdullah account share similar elements to the picture the remains of the shattered plane. The plane was exploded before crashing (*Daily Express*, 9/6/1976:6). More details about the position of the aircraft after the crash, see plate 1 below:

Individuals involved in this crash, including a group of Sabah state leaders, state officials, private escort, private secretary to Tengku Razaliyah Hamzah, co-pilot and Johari, son of Tun Mohd Fuad Stephens (Syed Ibrahim, 1976). Further information of list those who died in *Double Six* was able to be seen in table 2 as follows:

Meanwhile, there were speculations that tried to link the crash as sabotage. However, analysts generally agreed to conclude that the crash was "human negligence" as a major factor, while denying the tendency of some parties to make various assumptions. Datuk Mohd Harris Salleh and Toh Puan Rahimah Stephens himself agreed that the crash was happen closely related to "human error". Both parties consider that the event as a destiny of God (interview with Toh Puan Hajjah Rahimah Stephens, 21/2/2004; and interview with Datuk Mohd Harris Salleh, 28/2/2004).

Syed Abdullah Syed Ibrahim (1976), quoting police sources, said that the aircraft spins in air before crashed. Report describe that the driver failed to lift the aircraft wing aircraft to be coordinated with the oil pressure.

P.J. Granville-Edge (1999) wrote in his book that denied overloading as a major factor crash. He argued that if the overloading factor occurred earlier, it would be prevented from happening. A pilot on board profesional person, especially in the operation of the aircraft. He also always



Plate 1:
NOMAD Aircraft that Crashed in the Sea after Shallow
at Kg. Sembulan, Kota Kinabalu
(Source: File "Courtesy of Sabah State Archives")

keeps Tun Mohd Fuad Stephens safety. P.J. Granville-Edge (1999) also tend to argument that the accident link to the negligence element during on board.

Paul Raffaele (1986) also put entirely the pilot negligence that the case of crash. Just assumption, P.J. Granville-Edge (1999) said some individuals operate aircraft unlike the norm. The unable to control in good condition, the aircraft suddenly plummet to down (Raffaele, 1986).

To examine the actual factors, an aircraft engineer from Melbourne-Based Nomad GAF (Government Aircraft Factory), Paul Hughes, traveled from Australia with his Chief Pilot, Stuart Pearce, and Head of Aircraft Design, David Hooper. The findings of investigation, they denied that aircraft damage during on board (file "*Double Six*", 6/6/1976).

On June 10, 1976, the newspaper of *New Straits Times* reported those elements such as "human error" causing the accident and not due to the physical plane. On August 3, 1976, Patrick West of Technical Sales Manager for Asia and explained that the aircraft in perfect condition (cited in Granville-Edge, 1999).

Although several views showed on the crash factors, author agreed with opinions presented by Datuk Mohd Harris Salleh and Toh Puan Hajjah Rahimah Stephens. Both consistently say that the cause of the

Table 2:
List those Who Died in *Double Six* Tragedy

Individuals Involved in Crashes	Position in Sabah Cabinet
Tun Mohd Fuad Stephens	Chief Minister of Sabah
Datuk Salleh Sulong	Finance Minister Sabah
Datuk Peter Mojuntin	Minister of Local Government and Housing
Chong Thian Vun	Minister of Communications and Works
Darius Binion	Assistant Minister to the Deputy Chief Minister
Wahid Andu	Permanent Secretary, Ministry of Finance
Syed Hussein Wafa	Director of the State Economic Planning Unit
Ishak Atan	Private Secretary to the Tengku Razalieggh Hamzah
Kopral Mohd Said	Private guards Tun Fuad
Gandhi J. Nathan	Pilot
Johari Tun Fuad	Son of Tun Mohd Fuad Stephens

Source: File "*Double Six*, 6/6/1976".

crash was due to "human negligence" or human error (interview with Toh Puan Hajjah Rahimah Stephens, 21/2/2004; and interview with Datuk Mohd Harris Salleh, 28/2/2004).

Meanwhile, Datuk Ghani Gilong, as Federal Minister of Works and Transport who are responsible for leading a investigators, explained that the "excess capacity" as a key factor crash. He also denied there were elements of sabotage or conspiracy (cited in Luping, 1994).

After four months of investigation into the crash (28 October 1976), the Deputy Minister of Communications, Mohd Ali Mohd Sharif, informed that the investigation did not showed neither sabotage nor conspiracy (cited in Bongkos Malakun, 1981:161).

After all victims identified, the deceased sent for the funeral. Tun Mohd Fuad Stephens buried on the next day in the Tomb of the Warrior, in field State Mosque, Kota Kinabalu. The tomb located just half a mile from the crash site. As a final tribute to deceased Tun Mohd Fuad Stephens, most of the Federal and State leaders were present.

At the same time, the Tun Mohd Fuad Stephens eldest son, Johari Tun Fuad, buried in Likas Muslim cemetery. Meanwhile, the late Datuk Peter Mojuntin buried in Penampang and given final tribute at St. Michael, Penampang, honor by a message from the World Catholic Church (Syed Ibrahim, 1976).

PEOPLES AND GOVERNMENT OPINION ACCORDING TO THE CRASH

The accident received nationwide coverage, especially in the media. Radio and Television Malaysia (RTM) news broadcast reported, "*the Chief Minister of Sabah, Tun Fuad Stephens, including 10 others killed in crash*". The leaders made a comment with sympathy for the victims. Deputy Prime Minister, (Tun) Dr. Mahathir Mohammad commenting that accident as "a sad accident" (cited in file "*Double Six*, 6/6/1976"). Tunku Abdul Rahman was commented in *The Star* (newspaper) mentions that:

I was so shocked at the accident that befell the Tun Fuad and 10 others. This is part of life and no one can guess how long we will live in this universe. Coming and going is normal in life (*The Star*, 7/6/1976).

PAS (*Parti Al-Islam se Malaysia* or Malaysia Pan Islamic Party) President, Dato' Mohd Asri Hj. Muda, described "*Fuad departure will have a big effect on the political state. He praised that the state is in peace and tranquility*" (cited in file "*Double Six*, 6/6/1976").

MCA (Malaya Chinese Association) Vice-President, Tan Sri Lee Siok Yew, described that "*Tun Fuad is a fighter who will be remembered forever*" (cited in file "*Double Six*, 6/6/1976").

BN (*Barisan Nasional* or National Front) Secretary-General, (Tun) Abdul Ghaffar Baba, also tell the people of Sabah to be



Plate 2:

Individuals from Sabah Involved in *Double Six* Tragedy: Tun Mohd Fuad Stephens, Datuk Salleh Sulong, Datuk Peter Mojuntin, Chong Thian Vun, and Darius Binion
(Source: File "Courtesy of Sabah State Archives")

patient and calm. He mentioned that:

[...] even though we do feel sad and touched by this unexpected accident, we have to be patient because this is indeed the will of the almighty God, I admit that Fuad is a great figure (cited in file "Double Six, 6/6/1976").

Meanwhile UMNO (United Malays National Organization) Secretary-General, Dato' Senu Abdul Rahman, says "a great loss for the people of Sabah". MIC (Malaya Indian Congress) President, Tan Sri Manickavasagam, described Fuad as a "political figure and irreplaceable". A Sabahan leader, Datuk Abdul Ghani Gilong, described "Fuad is an experienced leader who fought with blood and tears" (cited in file "Double Six, 6/6/1976").

GERAKAN (Movement) Party's Deputy Secretary-General, Dr. Tan Tiong Hong, said "the departure of leaders like Fuad is a perceived loss of all". Meanwhile, DAP (Democratic Action Party) Secretary-General, Lim Kit Siang, mention that "the departure of Tun Fuad raise new developments in the political figure of Sabah" (cited in file "Double Six, 6/6/1976").

Most newspapers described the incident. The newspaper of *Utusan Melayu* in Kuala Lumpur (written in Jawi) noted as follows:

We recognize that Fuad is to do anything to the people of Sabah, especially the unity between Sabah and Kuala Lumpur. Fuad effort not only of the political crisis or a power struggle, but merely showed a persistence of honesty (cited in file "Double Six, 6/6/1976").

The newspaper of *New Strait Times* in Kuala Lumpur commented also as follows:

The departure of those involved shocked the nation, a tragedy, and sadness to the family of a blow to the government and party leadership of BERJAYA. Malaysia had lost a patriot and the loss of personel who aspire character (cited in file "Double Six, 6/6/1976").

The newspaper of *Utusan Malaysia* in Kuala Lumpur described as follows:

[...] the loss of significant figures will no doubt of profound effect on the BERJAYA party. It also gave effect to the USNO and SNAP (Sarawak), which will determine their position in the National Front or *Barisan Nasional* (cited in file "Double Six, 6/6/1976").

The newspaper of *Berita Harian* in Kuala Lumpur reported also as follows:

Fuad death and 10 people was a tragedy for the nation. He was a patriot, a tireless fighter for the sovereignty and independence of the homeland. An honest leader who dedicated their lives for the sake of the people of Sabah and Malaysia (cited in file "Double Six, 6/6/1976").

And *Asiaweek* magazine, issue on 18 June 1976, mention that "something that felt grief and loss to find parts" (cited in file "Double Six, 6/6/1976").

Finally, Datuk Mohd Harris Salleh invited all members of council to express our condolences to those involved in the crash. In his speech at the Sabah State Legislative Assembly on June 14, 1976, he informed that event make all the people of Sabah generally sad. And Toh Puan Hajjah Rahimah Stephens was more because she loss of two people who loved: it is her husband, Tun

Mohd Fuad Stephens; and her son, Johari Tun Fuad (cited in Granville-Edge, 1999:301).

MOHD HARRIS SALLEH APPOINTED AS CHIEF MINISTER OF SABAH

The absence of Tun Mohd Fuad Stephens as the head of government, the suitable candidate should be selected immediately. The Prime Minister and Chairman of the National Front or BN (*Barisan Nasional*), Dato' Hussein Onn, issued a statement advice to all people to avoid any political crisis in Sabah. Meanwhile, the USNO (United Sabah National Organization) leaders hope their party returned to lead the state with the federal consent. Instead, the Prime Minister reminded the public continues to provide and fully support to the new Chief Minister (*Kinabalu Sabah Times*, 9/6/1976:1).

The Prime Minister advice has actually managed to save the BERJAYA (*Bersatu Rakyat Jelata Sabah*) party to lead the government. The differ that Assemblyman or ADUN (*Ahli Dewan Undangan Negeri*) from BERJAYA and USNO only three seats. The most feared that happen, if BERJAYA Assemblyman (ADUN) cross into USNO team, BERJAYA governments can collapse (cited in file "*Double Six*, 6/6/1976").

It learned that four individual were killed in the crash who are the top leader of BERJAYA. Tun Mohd Fuad Stephens had its own strength for attracting support from indigenous Kadazandusun whom Muslim and non-Muslim. Meanwhile, Datuk Salleh Sulong represented the indigenous Muslim community, especially from the East Coast; while Chong Thian Vun and Peter Mojuntin strongly representing Christian community from Chinese and Kadazandusun.

After many senior party leaders were killed, the almost popular candidate to top post in Sabah was only Datuk Mohd Harris Salleh. At that time, he was the Deputy Chief Minister of Sabah. At 7.30 pm the next day, Datuk Mohd Harris Salleh called all BERJAYA Assemblyman to the State Development Operations Room for a briefing and announcement of new Chief Minister by the Prime Minister.

Tun Hussein Onn, then, announced that Datuk Mohd Harris Salleh (51 years) chosen as the sixth Chief Minister of Sabah replace the late Tun Mohd Fuad Stephens. Several hours later, Datuk Mohd Harris Salleh sworn in the presence of His Excellency, Tun Mohd Hamdan Abdullah, after received his consent (cited in file "*Double Six*, 6/6/1976"; and Syed Ibrahim, 1976).

Datuk Mohd Harris Salleh also announced that to form Sabah Cabinet Minister to facilitate their administration. They are James Ongkili, Joseph Pairin Kitingan, Yap Pak Leong, Mohd Noor Mansor, Lim Guan Sing, Suffian Koroh, and Toh Puan Hajjah Rahimah Stephens (Bongkos Malakun, 1981:162).

CONCLUSION

Most of the Malaysian people still wondering how *Double Six* tragedy can happen. Consequently, this essay attempts to answer with historical approaches. Writer moves the reader chronologically through carefully some sequence of events, before and after the crash. Generally, three factors led to the reluctant plane crash: pilot error, aircraft NOMAD design, and sabotage or conspiracy (Granville-Edge, 1999). However, writer strongly agree with Datuk Mohd Harris Salleh and Toh Puan Hajjah Rahimah Stephens that "human error" was a major factor in the *Double Six* tragedy.

When Tun Mohd Fuad Stephens passed away, the country had lost a great leader from Sabah, especially in establishing the relation between Federal and State (Kuala Lumpur and Kota Kinabalu). This accident also led to the appointment of Datuk Mohd Harris Salleh as Chief Minister of Sabah after the BERJAYA government has lost some senior leaders.

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