



There will be no publication tomorrow. **theSun** wishes everyone Happy Holidays and Merry Christmas. Please visit thesundaily.my for the latest news.

Online smut risks for kids

Unfiltered internet searches, unsupervised access to devices, peer-shared links and intrusive pop-up ads exposing young children to explicit content, including pornography.

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Call for sustainable tourism practices
 Academic stresses need to ensure country's precious environment remains pristine for future generations as more Malaysians opt for domestic ecotourism and wellness retreats.

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Anti-stray dogs school workbook draws howls of protest
 Animal issues should be addressed constructively and ethically as education is to instil students with empathy, critical thinking and sense of shared responsibility for all living beings, say experts.

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ON THE NICE LIST ... Children pose with Santa Claus and Santarina during a visit to a shopping mall in Kuala Lumpur. — AMIRUL SYAFIQ/THE SUN



Controversial link of GISBH to Al-Arqam shocks nation

➤ Authorities investigating allegations of exploitation, abuse and other crimes based on reports from alleged victims

KUALA LUMPUR: Three decades after the teachings of Al-Arqam were declared deviant in 1994, the nation is again abuzz with controversy following allegations surrounding Global Ikhwan Services and Business Holdings (GISBH), an organisation reportedly linked to the group.

GISBH, known for its extensive business network comprising restaurants, hotels, clinics and *tahfiz* centres, came under scrutiny this year after raids uncovered books associated with Al-Arqam teachings.

Authorities also investigated allegations of exploitation, abuse and other crimes based on reports from individuals claiming to be victims.

The controversy surrounding GISBH broke out when the Centre for the Study of Deviant Teachings claimed the company was linked to alleged cult activities, via its Facebook page on Aug 16.

Based on reports and intelligence, police launched the first phase of *Op Global* in early September, conducting raids on 20 charitable homes believed to be linked to GISBH in Selangor and Negeri Sembilan.

The coordinated operation, involving multiple enforcement agencies and religious authorities, led to the detention of 171 individuals to assist in investigations into cases of child abuse and religious exploitation.

A total of 402 individuals, comprising 201 boys and 201 girls aged between one and 17, were rescued. Among them were 10 children with disabilities, including autism.

The rescued children were sent to the Police Training Centre in Kuala Lumpur for health screenings, which revealed that 392 of them showed signs of suspected neglect and abuse, including physical and emotional harm.

The issue drew the attention of His Majesty the King of Malaysia

Sultan Ibrahim, who ordered police to conduct an immediate and thorough investigation into allegations of child abuse and mistreatment. Prime Minister Datuk Seri Anwar Ibrahim similarly called for swift action on the case.

The police investigation led to the remand of numerous individuals to assist in the probe, including senior management members, their spouses, GISBH leaders and the son of former Al-Arqam leader Ashaari Mohammad.

Additionally, 96 GISBH bank accounts were frozen and four were closed, involving assets valued at over RM581,000.

Multiple investigation papers were initiated under the Child Act 2001; the Sexual Offences Against Children Act 2017; the Anti-Trafficking in Persons and Anti-Smuggling of Migrants Act 2007; the Penal Code; and other applicable laws.

In the fourth phase of *Op Global*, authorities raided GISBH premises across several states, seizing pamphlets and documents allegedly associated with Al-Arqam teachings contrary to Islamic principles, along with various items linked to superstitious practices.

In a separate operation in Kelantan, authorities raided three

houses in Kampung Panji, suspected to be the residences of the GISBH CEO and his family.

Al-Arqam doctrine-based books and documents were discovered buried near a riverbank, with some reportedly burned, Bernama reported.

On Oct 3, Sultan of Selangor Sultan Sharafuddin Idris Shah approved the *fatwa* issued by the state Fatwa Committee, declaring that the leaders, followers, workers or members of GISBH and its network deviated from the true Islamic faith.

The same *fatwa* was issued in Pahang, Perlis, Negeri Sembilan, Sabah, Malacca, Perak and Penang, followed by a similar decision by the National Council of Islamic Religious Affairs on Nov 14.



HAPPY OCCASION ... Pahang Menteri Besar Datuk Seri Wan Rosdy Wan Ismail (left) handing over land title deeds to Fire and Rescue director-general Datuk Nor Hisham Mohamad at the groundbreaking ceremony for the Benta Fire and Rescue station yesterday. – **BERNAMAPIC**

Approval rating of PM increases to 54%

KUALA LUMPUR: Prime Minister Datuk Seri Anwar Ibrahim's approval rating increased to 54% among Malaysian voters in the second year of the Madani administration compared with 50% last year, according to a survey by the Merdeka Centre.

The survey, conducted in early December, found that voters were generally satisfied with Anwar's performance across a number of areas, including attracting investments, improving the country's image and improving civil service, but gave mixed assessments on efforts to strengthen the economy.

The independent organisation, which focuses on public opinion research and socioeconomic analyses, said in a statement that respondents gave the unity government an approval rating of 51% compared with 46% in November 2023.

"Dissatisfaction towards the federal government presently stands at 47%. The tight spread between positives and negatives is largely driven by persistent concerns about cost of living pressures and some anxiety over subsidy cuts slated to take place in the future."

The survey involved 1,207 registered voters, comprising 52% Malay, 29% Chinese, 7% Indian, 6% Muslim Bumiputera and 6% non-Muslim Bumiputera. – Bernama

Graduate numbers rise to 5m in 2023

PUTRAJAYA: Malaysia recorded 5.74 million graduates in 2023, reflecting a 4.2% increase with over two-thirds employed in skilled occupations, according to the Graduates Statistics 2023 report released yesterday.

Chief statistician Datuk Seri Dr Mohd Uzir Mahidin said the positive economic and labour market environment throughout 2023 contributed to this growth, with graduates making up 22.3% of the working-age population aged 15 and above.

"Of the total graduates, 4.92 million were active in the labour force, translating to a graduate labour force participation rate of 85.7%.

"Degree holders comprised 54.4% or 3.12 million while diploma holders accounted for 45.6% or 2.62 million. Year-on-year, the number of degree graduates in the labour force rose by 5.4% while diploma holders increased by 3.5%, supported by improved employment opportunities and lower unemployment rates."

Graduates, as defined in the report, are individuals with the highest certificate obtained from universities, colleges, polytechnics, recognised bodies or their equivalent, with a study duration of at least two years. – Bernama

Anwar has brought rapid changes to M'sia: Amirudin

KUALA LUMPUR: Prime Minister Datuk Seri Anwar Ibrahim's diligence since taking the helm of the unity government two years ago after the 15th general election has resulted in rapid changes in his administration.

Selangor Menteri Besar Datuk Seri Amirudin Shari praised Anwar's commitment to enhancing economic performance and safeguarding the country's political stability.

"The determination Anwar has shown in leading the nation is undeniable."

Amirudin was speaking during an appearance on the *Sembang Malam* programme, titled "Dua tahun Kerajaan Perpaduan Pimpinan Anwar Ibrahim", aired on Monday on Selangor TV's Facebook and YouTube platforms.

The programme, hosted by National Journalism Laureate Tan Sri Johan Jaafar, also featured Communications Minister Fahmi Fadzil, who is also spokesperson for the unity government, and Ilham Centre

executive director Hisomuddin Bakar.

Amirudin said Anwar shoulders a significant burden as he is closely associated with the image of the unity government, making him a frequent target of criticism from various quarters.

Fahmi highlighted the reforms introduced by Anwar during his two years leading the unity government, including achievements in economic growth, foreign investment, governance and anti-corruption initiatives.

He pointed out that these accomplishments are often overshadowed by the spread of misinformation and slander, which has created negative perceptions of the government and Anwar.

He emphasised that various plans announced by the unity government have shown positive results in terms of statistics, and expressed confidence that over the next two years, the public would experience even greater economic benefits. – Bernama

MCMC taking immediate action on Red IC application scam

KUALA LUMPUR: The Malaysian Communications and Multimedia Commission (MCMC) is taking immediate action to address scams relating to MyPR (Red IC) application ads on Facebook.

Communications Deputy Minister Teo Nie Ching said in a Facebook post she has been receiving reports of ads falsely claiming to assist with MyPR applications, some even promising approval within 21 days.

She said such activities will be investigated, with the perpetrators brought to justice.

"I urge everyone to remain vigilant and

question the legitimacy of what they encounter online, particularly when it seems too good to be true. Remember, misinformation spreads quickly, and taking a moment to verify claims can save you from becoming a victim.

"Many of these fraudulent posts are paid advertisements, which raises a critical question – how can platforms like Facebook, or their parent company Meta, allow such content to circulate without proper verification? This is a serious oversight that compromises user safety."

Teo also said the process of obtaining

permanent resident status in Malaysia is complex and lengthy, involving multiple stages and strict protocols under the Home Ministry to ensure national security.

She added that it is impossible for anyone to bypass these procedures or guarantee expedited approvals.

Teo said the situation shows the importance of the Online Safety Act 2024 and the Social Media Licensing Framework passed in the Dewan Rakyat recently.

She added that the frameworks, which will be

enforced on Jan 1 next year, hold platform providers accountable, ensuring they act ethically and responsibly to protect users from harmful content.

"With these frameworks, we can compel platforms like Meta to not only remove misleading advertisements swiftly, but also implement stricter measures to verify content before it reaches the public.

"Let's work together to create a safer, more trustworthy online environment for everyone," she said. – Bernama

Parents warned of preteen exposure to pornography

➤ Unsupervised access to devices, peer-shared links and intrusive pop-up ads identified as main sources of risk

BY KIRTINEE RAMESH
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PETALING JAYA: The Malaysia Cyber Consumer Association has warned parents to beware as social media, online games and unfiltered internet searches are exposing children aged between nine and 12 to explicit material, including pornography.

"The prime reasons for such exposure are unsupervised access to devices, peer-shared links and intrusive pop-up advertisements," said its executive council for education member Maswanhizzly Masri.

His warning comes on the heels of Communications Minister Fahmi Fadzil saying that Section 233 of the Communications and Multimedia Act 1998 would be amended to allow two forms of offences – paedophilia and the sale of online pornography – to be arrestable offences.

Fahmi also said platforms such as Facebook, TikTok, Instagram and X are in the community standard, which mandates that only those aged 13 and above can open an account on social media platforms.

Maswanhizzly said such platforms, including YouTube, are high-risk due to the ability of hackers to bypass their filters.

He said online gaming platforms with chat functions, such as Roblox and Discord, also pose a threat, enabling players to share

explicit links.

Messaging apps such as WhatsApp and Telegram further compound the issue through private or group chats.

"Unfiltered search engines worsen the problem when parental controls or "Safe Search" features are not enabled," he said.

He added that a National Population and Family Development Board Malaysia study showed that 78.3% of parents allowed their children to have mobile phones, citing educational and current needs as driving factors.

Maswanhizzly said tools such as Google Family Link for Android and Apple Screen Time for iOS, offer basic features like content filtering and screen time limits.

For more comprehensive monitoring, options like Qustodio, Norton Family and Kaspersky Safe Kids provide social media tracking, detailed activity reports and real-time alerts for "risky behaviour".

Executive director Benny Kong of Focus on the Family, which is a not-for-profit organisation dedicated to helping families thrive, said parents and educators should watch for signs like increased device use without supervision.

"Children's withdrawal from family, anxiety about body image or pushing sexual boundaries are indications of exposure to inappropriate content and should be investigated further.

"Early exposure to pornography can harm emotional, mental and social development as it can cause emotional distress, foster negative body image and normalise objectification."

Kong said children may imitate harmful behaviour seen online, leading to child-on-child abuse.

This is especially concerning as explicit content is increasingly accessible and getting more violent.

"Parents can provide age-appropriate sex education to prevent addiction to explicit content, and without shaming their children by setting up device filters and teaching self-regulation.

"Building strong relationships can address unusual behaviour, while seeking professional help is vital if they are unable to deal with the matter.

"Parents should also encourage open communication, set clear boundaries and create screen-free zones at home," he said.

CEO Murugason Thangaratnam of Novem CS, which specialises in solving cyber security challenges, said Malaysia recently passed the Online Safety Bill 2024, which is a step toward enhancing online safety in Malaysia.

The Bill, enacted under the Communications and Multimedia Act 1998, regulates harmful content and holds service providers, including Application Service Providers and Content Application Service Providers operating in Malaysia, responsible for filtering out explicit material.

Its First Schedule categorises harmful content such as child sexual abuse material, obscene content and indecent material, with specific protection for children.

Covid-19, influenza cases under control

PUTRAJAYA: The Covid-19 and influenza situation in Malaysia remains under control, with no increase in cases requiring intensive care treatment and no fatalities reported.

The Health Ministry said in a statement no new variants of concern have been detected, and the circulating SARS-CoV-2 variants in Malaysia are Omicron and its subvariants.

The ministry said reported cases decreased by 14.23% to 1,477 cases in Epidemiological Week (EW) 51, from Dec 15 to 21, compared with 1,722 cases the previous week.

Non-critical bed occupancy dropped from 0.16% to 0.13%, while intensive care unit bed occupancy declined from 0.14% to 0.10%.

"There have been no reported Covid-19 deaths since April 25, with the cumulative total remaining at 58 deaths," the statement read.

For influenza infections, the ministry reported that laboratory surveillance detected 139 out of 856 samples of influenza-like illness (ILI) at health clinics, and eight out of 67 samples of Severe Acute Respiratory Infections (Sari) at hospitals, with 11.94% tested positive for the influenza virus in EW50.

"Of the samples testing positive for influenza, 32% were influenza A, while 26% were influenza B."

This marks a decrease compared with the previous week, when 152 out of 827 ILI samples and nine out of 68 Sari samples tested positive for influenza.

The ministry stressed that although influenza infections are not required to be reported under the Prevention and Control of Infectious Diseases Act 1988, it is continuously monitoring influenza cases nationwide.

"The rise in Covid-19 and influenza cases at the end of the year is a fully anticipated phenomenon, consistent with the increase in respiratory tract infections also reported in other countries, especially those experiencing winter, such as Japan."

The public is advised to take proactive steps to maintain personal health and prevent infection or transmission to others during festive gatherings. – Bernama

Lecturer suspended over sexual messages

KUALA LUMPUR: A lecturer linked to the issue of sending sexually explicit messages has been suspended.

Universiti Malaya (UM) said in a statement the action was taken in accordance with the Statutory Bodies (Discipline and Surcharge) Act 2000.

"UM will continue to ensure that its campus environment is safe and conducive, including taking strict action against any party who commits misconduct regardless of position or status," the statement said.

Last Saturday, Higher Education Minister Datuk Seri Dr Zambry Abdul Kadir ordered UM to conduct an immediate investigation into the allegations.

Zambry said the order was issued so that UM would not take the case lightly and to ensure the case receives justice, adding that the ministry has no tolerance for misconduct that is against the country's laws. – Bernama



THRILLER DRAW ... A family taking a selfie with an inflatable of 'The Doll' from the Squid Game series at Ampang Park yesterday. – ADAM AMIR HAMZAH/THESUN

Rising preference for green tourism among M'sians

➤ Inclination driven by rich biodiversity, accessibility and alignment with modern health and eco-conscious trends: Expert

BY QIRANA NABILLA MOHD RASHIDI AND DEEPALAKSHMI MANICKAM
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PETALING JAYA: The increasing preference for green tourism among Malaysian travellers is highly encouraging, particularly in the context of Sabah, which attracted more than 2.1 million such travellers between January and August, said Universiti Malaysia Sabah Institute for Tropical Biology and Conservation director Assoc Prof Dr Fiffy Hanisdah Saikim.

She said the preference for nature-based destinations is driven by the country's rich biodiversity, accessibility and alignment with modern health and eco-conscious trends.

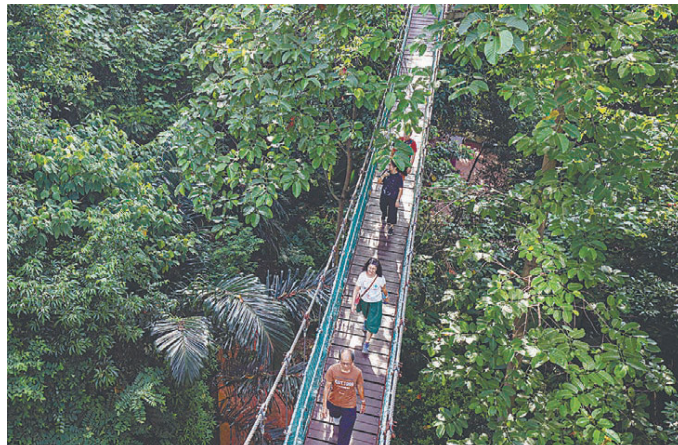
"These destinations fulfil leisure and relaxation needs, and offer opportunities to reconnect with our diverse natural heritage. The trend underscores the need for sustainable tourism practices to ensure the country's precious environments remain pristine for future generations."

Fiffy Hanisdah said by capitalising on its natural and cultural assets, aligning with global travel trends and addressing key challenges, Malaysia could position green tourism as a cornerstone of its inbound travel strategy and drive recovery and resilience in the post-pandemic era.

"To enhance green tourism, conservation efforts should include expanding protected areas, setting limits on tourist numbers to fragile zones and banning single-use plastics," she said, adding that Malaysia's potential as a green tourism destination is significant given its exceptional tropical biodiversity and abundant natural resources.

"As one of the world's megadiverse countries, green tourism has the potential to become a key pillar of Malaysia's tourism industry, particularly in the post-pandemic recovery phase, as global and domestic travel preferences increasingly shift towards sustainable and meaningful experiences."

Universiti Teknologi Mara tourism



Mohd Hafiz called for responsible tourism practices and infrastructure upgrades to address issues such as environmental degradation. — BERNAMAPIC

economics expert Prof Dr Mohd Hafiz Hanafiah said due to the weaker ringgit, Malaysians are exploring domestic destinations, including wellness retreats.

"Domestic tourism accounted for over 80% of 2024 tourism receipts, supporting SMEs and fostering community-based tourism in rural areas. The 27.2% increase in tourism expenditure is projected to add RM50 billion to the GDP and benefit cities such as Ipoh and Alor Setar.

"Food tourism, gig economy jobs and eco-tourism are flourishing," he said, adding that key beneficiaries include mid-priced hotels, domestic airlines and food and beverage hotspots such as Penang.

"Nature-based tourism at Taman Negara and Mulu Caves is also thriving as Malaysians embrace eco-tourism trends."

Mohd Hafiz called for responsible tourism practices and infrastructure upgrades to address issues such as environmental degradation at iconic destinations such as Pulau Langkawi and Cameron Highlands.

He said trends such as "workations" and dual-purpose campaigns for Visit Malaysia 2026 are shaping the future of domestic tourism.

"Events such as the Sarawak Rainforest World Music Festival could attract global attention while encouraging locals to rediscover their heritage. By balancing

sustainability and growth, our tourism sector is well positioned for long-term success."

Tourism Malaysia is also stepping up efforts to address the challenges of sustainable tourism.

Its director-general Datuk Manoharan Periasamy said the strong inclination towards green tourism complements the government's sustainable tourism agenda, as outlined in the National Ecotourism Plan 2016-2025 and the National Tourism Policy 2020-2030.

"Such preferences create significant opportunities to bolster our sustainability initiatives, particularly through the upcoming Visit Malaysia Year 2026 campaign."

He said challenges in promoting green tourism persists, particularly due to a lack of awareness among tourists and local stakeholders, which often leads to limited participation in eco-friendly initiatives.

He also said inadequate waste management systems, eco-friendly accommodations and sustainable public transport further hinder the development of sustainable tourism.

To address these challenges, Tourism Malaysia plans to streamline policies by collaborating with relevant authorities and improving coordination among government agencies while promoting sustainability among local communities.

Haj carnival to be held next month

KUALA LUMPUR: The Bumiputera Tour Operators Association and Lembaga Tabung Haji will host the third Haj, Umrah and Tourism Carnival from Jan 3 to 5.

Association president Dr Wan Muhamad Adam Wan Norudin said the event will take place at the Movenpick Hotel and Convention Centre KLIA in Sepang, Selangor.

He added that the carnival is designed to showcase the excellence and transparency of the two hosts in managing haj and umrah services while also assuring prospective pilgrims of the capability of the agencies in handling these sectors.

"This collaboration enables prospective pilgrims for 2025 to make informed and comfortable decisions regarding their religious journey," he said at a pre-launch press conference for the carnival at Menara Kuala Lumpur on Monday.

Lembaga Tabung Haji haj department head Mohd Hisham Harun said a strong turnout of 20,000 is expected at the carnival, following the previous edition's success in attracting 16,000 visitors.

"This carnival is one of the efforts to promote the haj packages provided by 37 travel agencies licensed by Lembaga Tabung Haji as haj pilgrimage operators.

"The main event during the carnival will be the offer of various attractive haj packages at competitive prices from 37 companies, including an economy haj package priced below RM55,000 per person." — Bernama

Panther caught in Gua Musang

KOTA BHARU: The Kelantan Wildlife Protection and National Parks Department caught a panther in Kampung Gua, Paloh 1 in Gua Musang on Monday.

Its director Mohamad Hafid Rohani said the animal entered a trap set up on Sunday.

"Six members of the Kuala Krai district department and Gua Musang Wildlife Conservation Centre carried out an operation to transfer the panther to a suitable habitat.

"The capture of the panther has eased villager anxiety about their safety. The panther is believed to have come out of the Relai Permanent Forest Reserve located near the village in search of food."

He said advisory services had been given to villagers to clear the bushes around the village and farms, as well as to always be in groups when visiting the farms and not enter the farm area at night.

"Complaints can be channelled to the department through its hotline 1-800-88-5151 or at wildlife.gov.my." — Bernama

50 trees dead after suspected poisoning

BUKIT MERTAJAM: About 50 Tecoma trees planted within the River Trail recreation park at Kolam Teratai in Sungai Rambai have been found dead, suspected to have been poisoned.

Seberang Perai City Council member Bernard G.H. Cheen said he received complaints from the public on Saturday that leaves had dried up and fallen off before the trees eventually died.

"I thought the trees were shedding leaves due to the hot and dry weather. However, after inspecting the site yesterday, I realised a number of trees are affected. Some are completely dry while others have yellowing leaves and are on the brink of death.

"Observations suggest that the tree bases were likely doused with a liquid, possibly poison, as the surrounding grass has visibly withered and died."

He said a probe is ongoing to identify the perpetrators and the motive. — Bernama

Pollution at Sungai Pinang resolved by authorities

BY KIRTINEE RAMESH
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PENANG: The unsanitary conditions caused by pollution and waste dumping, and the unbearable stench endured by students and staff of SJKT Ramathasar and residents near Sungai Pinang here have been addressed, thanks to efforts by the Penang Hindu Association (PHA) and authorities.

PHA president Datuk P. Murugiah said after raising concerns about the situation, the grievances shared by PHA gained the attention of state and federal authorities, which took action to resolve the issue.

He said with support from local communities, a clean-up initiative saw a coordinated effort by the Penang Island City Council, Department of Irrigation and Drainage and other stakeholders.

"A dedicated team was deployed to clear

the large piles of rubbish that had accumulated behind the school, along its pathway and near the riverbank, which included plastic bottles, styrofoam packaging, rubber debris, ropes and even animal carcasses.

"Upon visiting the site, it was clear that the area has been transformed. The stench and visible litter are gone, leaving a cleaner and safer environment for the students, teachers and residents."

On Dec 17, *theSun* reported that large amounts of waste was polluting the area, causing an unbearable stench and health concerns.

Murugiah said PHA was informed that the waste would be carefully sorted and segregated, with non-recyclable materials disposed in an environmentally safe manner.

He commended the swift response of

authorities, highlighting their commitment to environmental protection and public health.

"PHA believes that it is the responsibility of every member of the public to be environmentally conscious and responsibly dispose waste. This collective responsibility is essential not just for the cleanliness of Sungai Pinang but the entire country."

He also said as part of efforts to address the ongoing waste problem, authorities are working on installing CCTV cameras along Sungai Pinang to monitor illegal dumping activities.

"We are pushing for an increase in the frequency of clean-up operations to ensure the area remains free from debris and waste, preventing further contamination of the river. Regular inspections are being planned to ensure waste management practices are adhered to and any issues are addressed promptly."



Merry Christmas & Happy New Year 2025

Sincere wishes from
YAB Dato' Seri Amirudin Shari
Dato' Menteri Besar Selangor



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Hackles raised over anti-strays workbook

▶ Portraying animals negatively undermines goal of instilling students with empathy, critical thinking: Expert

■ BY QIRANA NABILLA MOHD RASHIDI
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PETALING JAYA: Animal abuse has become an issue of concern lately, with Universiti Malaya being the latest to face controversy over several mutilated cat carcasses found on its Kuala Lumpur campus.

The Federal Territory Veterinary Services Department claimed they died as a result of dog bites, but independent animal rescuer Shima Aris said an autopsy report indicated the cats died as a result of abuse by humans and is calling for a thorough investigation.

Now, another controversy has surfaced. A Bahasa Melayu workbook for Form Five students is sparking online debates over the portrayal of stray dogs as a menace.

The workbook, which tasked students with writing an essay as a complaint letter to local authorities regarding stray dogs, has drawn criticism for putting them in negative light.

Parent Action Group for Education Malaysia chairman Datin Noor Azimah Abdul Rahim said the workbook should be improved to address animal-related issues in a constructive, ethical and educational manner.

She said teaching students about values such as love and care for animals goes beyond just reading a textbook.

"It is about values, which could be expanded to include the welfare of animals. It is best discussed in the classroom with the teacher initiating an interactive session with students rather than merely reading off a textbook," she said.

Noor Azimah added that such an approach would encourage students to engage more deeply with the topic and foster empathy, allowing for a richer understanding of the issues surrounding animal welfare.

National Association of Private Educational Institutions secretary general Dr Teh Choon Jin said education should instil students with empathy, critical thinking and a sense of shared responsibility for all living beings.

"By portraying animals negatively, we risk undermining these goals and teaching students to approach issues like stray animals with fear or bias rather than understanding and compassion. We should (review) the workbook to ascertain why a more suitable (topic) was not chosen."

theSun reached out to the Education Ministry for comment, but a spokesman replied: "The workbook is not from the ministry."

Teh said educational content should undergo reviews every five years and the process should include feedback from a diverse

group of stakeholders, including NGOs, community leaders and subject matter experts.

"This will prevent content from unintentionally propagating harmful stereotypes or misinformation. Doing so would also shape narratives that are factually accurate and instil a sense of empathy and responsibility in students."

Teh added that by viewing strays as undeserving of care and coexistence, students may grow up seeing them as threats or inconveniences, which would be a significant step backwards for animal welfare and societal harmony.

He also said education should be a bridge to understanding, not a tool to reinforce fear or prejudice.

"Lessons could focus on responsible pet ownership, the ecological role of animals and ethical methods of addressing stray populations, such as spaying, neutering and community adoption initiatives. Respect for cultural sensitivities does not mean ignoring ethical standards or scientific knowledge about animal welfare."

"We need inclusive content that bridges cultural beliefs with universal principles like compassion, coexistence and responsibility. Open dialogue with communities and sensitivity training for educators could help achieve this balance."

Teh emphasised that teachers and educators involved in curriculum development must be trained to use the right materials and examples to align with learning outcomes or objectives of the subjects taught in the school.

Storm wreaks havoc at four villages

SEMPORNA: A total of 497 people were affected after 113 homes in four water villages here were damaged or destroyed in a storm that struck on Sunday.

Semporna district officer Alexander Liew said the storm, which occurred at 3am, impacted Kampung Selamat, Kampung Sri Aman, Kampung Sejati and Kampung Batu.

"The storm resulted in damage to 102 houses, with 11 structures collapsing, including two mosques. Twenty vehicles were also affected."

"One temporary relief centre has been opened at the Bubul Ria People's Housing Project, currently housing 59 individuals," he told reporters.

Liew added that his team is working closely with relevant agencies to ensure a systematic response to disasters in the district.

Resident Anuar Yakub, 45, described the storm as terrifying, likening it to a tornado that swept through his home.

"I saw the roof being torn off and carried away by the wind. Our house was 'lifted' before being 'dropped' into the sea. The strong winds lasted for more than 10 seconds."

"At the time, I was at home with my wife and three children. As soon as the wind moved on, we rushed out. We were thankful that the seawater was shallow," he said.

Wilmah Jainin, 34, said half of her house, including the bedroom and kitchen area, was destroyed, and the roof was ripped off by the storm.

"I am traumatised. This is the first time such a disaster has occurred in Kampung Selamat," she said, adding that she was grateful her entire family was safe.

She also expressed hope that the government will provide appropriate assistance to all affected residents, including for repairs.

Meanwhile, Bugaya assemblyman Jamil Hamzah said assistance, including zinc sheets for repairing damaged houses and two affected mosques, would be provided. - Bernama



Teh said by viewing strays as undeserving of care and coexistence, students may grow up seeing them as threats. - ADAM AMIR HAMZAH/THESUN

Be wary of dubious online ads: Cops

KUALA LUMPUR: The Bukit Aman Commercial Crime Investigation Department (CCID) has identified a TikTok account using the voice and video of a local medical expert without consent to promote health products.

Its director Datuk Seri Ramli Mohamed Yoosuf said the account "Malaysia Shopping Mall" was found promoting medical products without authorisation using the voice and video of Prof Datuk Dr Noordin Darus.

"His voice and video was used without his consent and is believed to have involved artificial intelligence (AI) technology."

"Bukit Aman CCID reminds the public to always be cautious and not easily trust advertisements on social media," he said in a statement.

He added that the sophistication of AI technology has contributed to the emergence of advertisements featuring voices, images and videos of prominent individuals without permission, with the intent to mislead potential buyers. - Bernama

Seven dead, 33 injured in five-vehicle crash

ALOR GAJAH: Seven people were killed and 33 others injured in a collision involving five vehicles at Km204 of the North-South Expressway (northbound) near the Ayer Keroh rest and service area on Monday night.

The crash, which occurred at 8.45pm, involved a tour bus carrying 27 passengers, a car, two lorries and an MPV.

Preliminary investigations revealed the tour bus struck a tyre of a lorry in the middle lane, lost control and veered into the opposite lane, colliding with three vehicles.

Alor Gajah district police chief Supt Ashari Abu

Samah identified the MPV victims as the driver Khairul Ikhwan Mazupi, 32, and his son, two-year-old Muhammad Umar, from Bandar Baru Bangi in Selangor, his wife Fadzenna Ramli, 32, and her father Ramli Ab Wahab, 67, from Pantai Dalam in Kuala Lumpur and Fauziah Jaafar, 69.

The couple's eldest son, Muhammad Uwais Al-Qarni, seven, sustained critical injuries, while their second child, Nur Sofea Humaira, four, is reported to be in stable condition.

Khairul's sister, Nur Aqilah Mazupi, 30, said the family had travelled to Malacca last Saturday to attend a reunion organised by

Fadzenna's relatives.

She described the event as special, which was the first time all three of her brother's children celebrated their birthdays together.

"They were born in February and December, but to ensure no one felt left out, we held a joint celebration," she said when met at the Malacca Hospital Forensic Department.

The other two casualties were bus driver Noorinsien Khamid, 56, from Skudai in Johor and Singaporean passenger Lamrah Asid Ali, 66.

Ashari urged those who witnessed the incident to contact the Alor Gajah district police

station at 06-556 4153 or its traffic investigating officer Insp Mohd Azmin Ismail at 010-818 2624 or the nearest police station to assist investigations.

Malacca Fire and Rescue Department director Mohd Pizar Aziz said 17 injured victims were taken to the Malacca Hospital, 10 to the Alor Gajah Hospital and six to the Pantai Ayer Keroh Hospital.

He added that the department received a distress call at 8.45pm and 27 personnel were dispatched to the scene.

The incident caused traffic congestion of over 10km in both directions of the highway. - Bernama

Tsunami detection buoys help to safeguard coastal areas

➤ 74 devices part of early warning system

BANGKOK: Almost 1,000km off the Thai coast devastated by a tsunami 20 years ago, engineers lower a detection buoy into the waves – a key link in a warning system intended to ensure no disaster is as deadly again.

On Dec 26, 2004, a magnitude 9.1 earthquake triggered huge waves up to 30m high.

Only a rudimentary warning system was in place at the time, with no way to alert the millions of people living around the Indian Ocean. More than 225,000 people were killed in a dozen countries.

In the years following the disaster, governments developed a global tsunami information system, building on the US National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration's network of six detection buoys in the Pacific.

Known as Deep-Ocean Assessment and Reporting of Tsunamis (DART), the system has 74 buoys around the world.

Each floats on the surface while tethered to the seabed, monitoring signals from a seismic sensor on the ocean floor and changes in the water level.

Installed in some of the toughest working environments anywhere on the planet, the battery-powered buoys must be replaced every two years. Only 50 of the devices are operational but the network has been designed to provide coverage regardless.

The Thai research vessel *M.V. SEAFDEC* crew gently lowered a replacement buoy, a yellow cylinder about 2m in diameter, this month into the Indian Ocean 965km offshore.

The same team also sought to replace a closer buoy in the Andaman Sea, 340km from the coast, but were unsuccessful and will mount a new mission in the coming weeks.

Shawn Stoeckley, a mechanical engineer from buoy manufacturers Science Applications International Corporation, calibrates the system from his laptop on board before it is deployed.

"I feel that it has a lot of purpose, that it can save lives," he said.

The 2004 tsunami killed more than 5,000 people in Thailand, according to official figures, with 3,000 missing.

Now the country's two DART buoys are linked by satellite to a nationwide network of 130 alarm

towers equipped with sirens and loudspeakers that can broadcast in five languages in coastal provinces.

Residents in disaster-prone areas also receive an SMS alert of an imminent tsunami, warning them to evacuate quickly.

Before 2004, it would take anywhere from 15 to 50 minutes before an alarm could be issued, said Laura Kong, director of Unesco's International Tsunami Information Centre.

"Today it's typical we would get something within five to seven minutes," she said.

There is a "100% chance" of another tsunami on the scale of 2004 at some point, Bernardo Aliaga, Unesco's head of Tsunami Resilience Section, told an

anniversary conference, adding it "could be tomorrow or in 50 years or 100 years".

In Sri Lanka – where 31,000 were killed in 2004, making it the second-worst-hit country – more than three-quarters of the 77 tsunami warning towers the government installed are not operating because the communications equipment has become obsolete, said the island's Disaster Management Centre chief Udaya Herath.

Mobile phone companies have instead identified some 70,000 "key contacts" in coastal areas, including resort managers, to receive warnings and evacuation orders in the event of impending danger. – AFP



A tsunami detection buoy is moved into place in the Andaman Sea. – AFP/IC

Thai Cabinet approves handouts, new minimum wage

BANGKOK: Thailand's Cabinet yesterday approved new minimum wage increases from next month, tax breaks to boost spending and the second phase of the government's handout scheme.

Prime Minister Paetongtarn Shinawatra said she hoped for economic growth of more than 3% next year.

The government has said it wants to raise the daily minimum wage to 400 baht (RM52.60) nationwide to help drive the economy.

However, the wage committee on Monday decided to raise the daily minimum wage by 2.9% to between 337 baht and 400 baht, varying in each region, effective Jan 1.

The top end of that range will apply only to the provinces of Phuket, Chachoengsao, Chon Buri and Rayong, and the holiday island of Samui.

Paetongtarn said the government also approved tax breaks to boost consumption, but gave no details.

Deputy Finance Minister Julapun Amornvivat said the government would offer a tax deduction of up to 50,000 baht based on proven spending, but excluding domestic travel. The tax breaks will be introduced between Jan 16 and Feb 28, he said.

The prime minister said the Cabinet had approved the second phase of the handout scheme worth 40 billion baht for four million elderly people who would receive payments by January. – Reuters

S'pore Post CEO fired over misconduct inquiry

SINGAPORE: Singapore Post has dismissed its chief executive and two other senior managers after an internal investigation found they had mishandled whistleblower allegations about misconduct by employees.

The alleged misconduct reported by the whistleblower related to several employees who worked in the company's international e-commerce logistics parcels business, the company said in a statement.

The firm had received a whistleblowing report alleging that three unnamed employees had either approved or manually updated a "delivery failure" status code for parcels, even though no delivery was done, the statement said.

CEO Vincent Phang, the chief of the company's international business unit Li Yu and Chief Financial Officer Vincent Yik had been dismissed after the company found they had been "negligent" in handling the case and misrepresented it before an audit committee, it said.

Chair Simon Israel will oversee senior management of Singapore Post in the interim.

Phang and Yik said they will contest the termination, "both on merit and grounds of procedural unfairness". – Reuters

Golden tigresses become social media stars

CHIANG MAI: Rare golden tigresses with cream-coloured coats and wide eyes at a zoo in northern Thailand have become internet sensations, after luring massive crowds to shows.

Unusually coloured Bengal tigers like siblings Ava and Luna, both three years old, are found only in animal

breeding centres or zoos rather than in the wild, said Patcharee Pipatwongchai, the tiger trainer at Chiang Mai's Night Safari.

The twin sisters, born in captivity, made their debut at the zoo in June and became a sensation after they were featured on social media.

They draw sellout crowds at the zoo's 500-seat arena at shows four days a week, where they perform tricks alongside their trainer.

"Seeing this tiger, I think it's incredibly intelligent and capable of delivering surprising performances like this, I'm happy that Chiang Mai has

such smart animals as a key attraction," said visitor Wirunya Punyokit from Chiang Mai.

The animals' rare pigmentation results from recessive genes, the Thai National Parks website said, which give them thick, pale gold fur and legs and faint orange stripes. – Reuters

Vietnam officials go on trial over pandemic flight bribes

HANOI: More than a dozen officials went on trial here yesterday for alleged corruption over repatriation flights in 2020, a scandal that saw 54 people jailed last year.

The case is part of a major anti-graft drive that has led to the resignation of a president and two deputy prime ministers in a country where political changes are usually carefully orchestrated.

Last year, 54 officials and business people were found guilty of receiving, offering or acting as the go-between for bribes that state

media said totalled US\$9.5 million (RM42.6 million).

They included four former senior officials at the ministries of foreign affairs, health and public security, who were handed life sentences.

Among the 17 facing court yesterday on charges of bribery, power abuse and hiding of criminals are Transport Ministry and provincial officials as well as travel company employees.

The amount involved in this case is about US\$350,000, with the trial expected to last about a week.

At the height of the pandemic in early 2020 – when Vietnam had closed its borders to almost everyone bar returning citizens – the defendants allegedly gave or took bribes to help people get seats on repatriation flights.

At the time, returnees faced complicated entry procedures, expensive flights and quarantine costs.

Last year, a Hanoi mother said she had spent over US\$10,000 to get her teenage daughter back to Vietnam from a boarding school in Europe.

The graft allegations come as part of an anti-corruption drive that has uncovered a number of deals done during Vietnam's public health response.

Last year, the National Assembly removed former foreign affairs minister Pham Binh Minh and Vu Duc Dam, who oversaw the public health response, from their positions as deputy prime ministers.

The crackdown also brought down President Nguyen Xuan Phuc after he "took responsibility" for various officials' shortcomings. – AFP

South Korean opposition puts off plan to impeach acting president

SEOUL: South Korea's main opposition party vowed yesterday to impeach acting president Han Duck-soo but reversed an earlier plan and decided to wait until later in the week, party officials said, as the risk of further political uncertainty heightened.

The move comes as the country is reeling from impeached President Yoon Suk Yeol's short-lived bid to impose martial law on Dec 3 that he partly blamed on the opposition's propensity to impeach government officials.

Opposition Democratic Party (DP) floor

leader Park Chan-dae said the party will wait until later this week to decide whether to go ahead with the plan to impeach Han. Earlier, the party said it would introduce a bill to impeach Han yesterday.

The DP, which has a majority in parliament, is taking the step after Han postponed signing legislation to launch a special counsel investigation into President Yoon Suk Yeol's failed bid to impose martial law.

It said Han was acting against the will of the people, effectively aiding Yoon, whose powers

have been suspended after parliament voted to impeach him on Dec 14.

Once an impeachment bill is submitted then formally introduced at a plenary session, it must be voted on within 24 to 72 hours.

If Han is impeached, the finance minister would be next in line to lead the government as acting president, according to South Korean law.

Prime Minister Han took over from the suspended Yoon, who faces a Constitutional Court review on whether to oust him or restore his powers.

"Acting president Han made it clear at today's Cabinet meeting that he would not greenlight the special prosecution law," the DP's Park said.

"There is no way to interpret it other than that he is delaying time."

With its parliamentary majority, the DP passed bills this month to appoint a special counsel to pursue charges of insurrection and other allegations.

An unnamed high-ranking official from Han's office called the DP's move to impeach Han "highly regrettable". – Reuters

Hong Kong offers bounties for six more democrats

➤ 19 on wanted list for violating security laws

HONG KONG: Authorities here imposed bounties of HK\$1 million (RM577,882) on six more pro-democracy campaigners deemed to have violated national security laws, and revoked the passports of seven others, in a continuing security squeeze in the financial hub.

Hong Kong's Secretary for Security Chris Tang said the six – all based overseas in countries including Britain and the United States – had engaged in the alleged crimes of incitement to secession, subversion and collusion with foreign forces.

The six included UK-based commentator Chung Kim-wah, former head of a pro-independence group Tony Chung, and Carmen Lau, a member of the Hong Kong Democracy Council.

"(I) will not back down only because of an

arrest warrant and a bounty. And I hope to have every one of you standing with me in this fight for Hong Kong," wrote Lau on Twitter.

The move to add more names to Hong Kong's wanted list comes as the city strives to revive its economic growth and international reputation after a years-long crackdown on dissent that has drawn global criticism.

China and Hong Kong authorities have defended the clampdown under sweeping national security laws, saying stability has been restored after mass pro-democracy protests in 2019.

Tang said the six pro-democracy campaigners had engaged in activities including giving speeches, social media posts and lobbying for Hong Kong officials and judges to be sanctioned by foreign governments, thus endangering national security.

China's office for safeguarding national security in Hong Kong said in a statement it supported the actions as these individuals had engaged in "anti-China" and destabilising acts.

Others were deemed to have advocated Hong Kong's independence from China. Hong Kong, a former British colony for over 150 years, returned to Chinese rule in 1997.

"Instead of celebrating X'mas, it (Hong Kong) is taking a major step to escalate its transnational repression campaign," wrote Anna Kwok, a US based Hong Kong activist.

There are now a total of 19 opposition figures on the city's wanted list including lawyers Kevin Yam and Dennis Kwok, former lawmaker Ted Hui and activists Nathan Law and Joey Siu.

Hui had HK\$800,000 of his money confiscated from an unlicensed bank in the city, Tang said. Notices bearing black and white photographs of the "fugitives" have been posted in public including at Hong Kong's international airport.

Seven "absconders", including Hui, who are now based overseas, also had their passports revoked under a fresh set of national security laws known as Article 23, enacted this year.

"They will become someone without an identity," Tang told reporters. – Reuters

China sanctions Canada institutions

BEIJING: China said it was taking countermeasures against two Canadian institutions and 20 people involved in human rights issues concerning the Uyghurs and Tibet.

The measures, which took effect on Saturday, include asset freezes and bans on entry. The targets include the Canada-based Uyghur Rights Advocacy Project and the Canada-Tibet Committee, China's Foreign Ministry said.

China said it was freezing property of the two institutions within China. It said it was also freezing the property in China of 15 people in the Uyghur institution and five on the Tibet committee, as well as banning them from entering China, including Hong Kong and Macau.

Rights groups accuse Beijing of widespread abuses of Uyghurs, an ethnic minority that numbers around 10 million in the western region of Xinjiang, including the mass use of forced labour in camps. Beijing denies any abuses.

"I accept it (the sanctions) as a badge of honour," said Mehmet Tohti, executive director of the Uyghur Rights Advocacy Project.

"What we did here in Canada has started to resonate in China and it starts to hurt and for that reason, I see this as a sign of accomplishment."

China seized control of Tibet in 1950 in what it describes as a "peaceful liberation" from feudalistic serfdom. International human rights groups and exiles, however, have routinely condemned what they call China's oppressive rule in Tibetan areas. – Reuters

US\$300m theft pinned on N. Koreans

TOKYO: A North Korean hacking group stole cryptocurrency worth over US\$300 million (RM1.3 billion) from the Japan-based exchange DMM Bitcoin, according to Japanese police and FBI.

The TraderTraitor group – believed to be part of the Lazarus Group, which is allegedly linked to the Pyongyang authorities – carried out the heist, Japan's National Police Agency said yesterday.

Lazarus Group gained notoriety a decade ago when it was accused of hacking into Sony Pictures as revenge for *The Interview*, a film that mocked North Korean leader Kim Jong Un.

The FBI detailed "the theft of cryptocurrency worth US\$308 million from the Japan-based cryptocurrency company DMM by North Korean cyber actors" in a separate statement on Monday.

It described a "targeted social engineering" operation where a hacker pretended to be a recruiter on LinkedIn to contact an employee of a different crypto wallet software company.

They sent the employee what appeared to be a pre-employment test, which actually contained a malicious line of code.

That allowed the hacker to compromise their system and impersonate the employee, the FBI said.

"In late May 2024, the actors likely used this access to manipulate a legitimate transaction request by a DMM employee, resulting in the loss of 4,502.9 Bitcoin, worth US\$308 million at the time," it said. – AFP



BRIGHT AND READY ... Choristers light candles during a rehearsal for Christmas services at St Paul's Cathedral in London. – REUTERS/PIC

Mediators push for truce, hostage deal

➤ Issue of ending war not resolved yet: Official

CAIRO: Gaps between Israel and Hamas over a possible Gaza ceasefire have narrowed, according to remarks from Israeli and Palestinian officials, although crucial differences have yet to be resolved.

A fresh bid by mediators Egypt, Qatar and the United States to end the fighting and release Israeli and foreign hostages has gained momentum, although no breakthrough has yet been reported.

Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu on Monday said progress had been made in hostage negotiations with Hamas in Gaza but he did not know how much longer it would take to see results.

During a speech in Israel's Knesset, Netanyahu said Israel had made "great achievements" militarily on several fronts and that military pressure on Hamas had led its leaders to soften their previous demands.

A Palestinian official familiar with the talks said while some sticking points had been resolved, the identity of some of the Palestinian prisoners to be released by Israel in

return for hostages had yet to be agreed, along with the deployment of Israeli troops in Gaza.

His remarks corresponded with comments by Israeli Diaspora Minister Amichai Chikli, who said both issues were still being negotiated.

He said nonetheless, the sides were far closer to reaching an agreement than they have been for months.

"This ceasefire can last six months or it can last 10 years, it depends on the dynamics that will form on the ground," Chikli told Israel's Kan radio. Much hinged on what powers would be running and

rehabilitating Gaza once fighting stops, he said.

The duration of the ceasefire has been a fundamental sticking point throughout several rounds of failed negotiations.

Hamas wants an end to the war, while Israel wants an end to Hamas rule in Gaza first.

"The issue of ending the war completely hasn't yet been resolved," said the Palestinian official.

Chikli said the first stage would be a humanitarian phase that will last 42 days and include a hostage release deal.

Israel's military offensive in Gaza has since killed more than 45,200

Palestinians.

Most of the population of 2.3 million has been displaced and much of Gaza is in ruins.

At least 24 Palestinians were killed in Israeli strikes on Monday, medics said.

Among the dead were four Palestinians killed when an Israeli airstrike hit a group of Palestinians tasked with protecting aid trucks moving into Gaza.

Later on Monday, the Israeli military issued evacuation orders to residents of several districts in the Shejaia neighbourhood of Gaza City, citing rocket firing from the area. – Reuters



A Damascus resident looks at pictures of missing people, believed to be prisoners from Sednaya prison, in Martyrs Square. – REUTERS/SPIC

Israel admits assassinating Hamas leader

CAIRO: Israeli Defence Minister Israel Katz admitted on Monday for the first time publicly to Israel's killing of Hamas leader Ismail Haniyeh in Iran in July, further risking tensions between Tehran and its arch-enemy Israel in a region shaken by Israel's war in Gaza and the conflict in Lebanon.

"These days, when the Houthis are firing missiles at Israel, I want to convey a clear message to them at the beginning of my remarks.

"We have defeated Hamas, we have defeated Hezbollah, we have blinded Iran's defence systems and damaged the production systems, we have toppled the Assad regime in Syria, we have dealt a severe blow to the axis of evil, and we will also deal a severe blow to the Houthi organisation in Yemen, which remains the last to stand," Katz said.

Israel will "damage their strategic infrastructure, and we will behead their leaders – just as we did to Haniyeh, Sinwar and Nasrallah in Tehran, Gaza and Lebanon, and we will do it in Hodeidah and Sanaa," Katz said during an evening honouring Defence Ministry personnel.

Houthis have been attacking commercial shipping in the Red Sea for more than a year to try to enforce a naval blockade on Israel, saying they are acting in solidarity with Palestinians in Israel's year-long war in Gaza.

In late July, the political leader of Hamas was killed in Tehran in an assassination blamed on Israel by Iranian authorities.

There was no direct claim of responsibility by Israel for the killing of Haniyeh at the time.

Haniyeh, normally based in Qatar, had been the face of Hamas' international diplomacy as the war raged in Gaza.

He had been taking part in internationally brokered indirect talks on reaching a ceasefire in the Palestinian enclave.

Months later, Israeli forces in Gaza killed Yahya Sinwar, Haniyeh's successor. – Reuters

Evidence of abuse in Syria must be protected, say groups

BEIRUT: Three rights group on Monday appealed to Syria's new rulers to urgently preserve evidence of atrocities.

Such evidence – including government and intelligence documents as well as mass graves – will be essential for establishing the fate of tens of thousands of missing people, and for prosecuting those responsible for crimes under international law, the groups said.

"The transitional Syrian authorities should urgently take steps to secure and preserve evidence of atrocities committed under the former government," said Amnesty International, Human Rights Watch and the

Association of Detainees and Missing Persons in Sednaya Prison (ADMSP).

The Sednaya complex, the site of extrajudicial executions, torture and forced disappearances, epitomised the atrocities committed against opponents of the government.

"Every additional minute of inaction heightens the risk that a family may never discover the fate of their missing loved one, and an official responsible for horrific crimes may never be brought to justice," said ADMSP programme manager Shadi Haroun.

He said investigators from the three organisations visited detention facilities, mass

graves and the military court after rebels took over Damascus on Dec 8.

"In all of the detention facilities visited, researchers observed that official documents were often left unprotected, with significant portions looted or destroyed," the groups said.

They said they gathered testimony that security and intelligence personnel burned some material before they fled, but in other cases the armed groups who took control of the facilities, or newly-freed prisoners, also burned and looted material.

The researchers said they themselves saw ordinary people and some journalists "take some documents". – AFP

Canberra seeks release of Australian held by Russian military

SYDNEY: Australia's prime minister said yesterday his government is working to secure a "positive outcome" after a video emerged of an Australian man captured by Russian forces in Ukraine.

In video footage, the man is seen with his hands tied and being slapped across the face.

The man said he was a biology teacher named Oscar Jenkins and that

he had joined the armed forces because he wanted to help Ukraine. Australian media verified the man's identity.

Prime Minister Anthony Albanese said his office had made "appropriate representations" with Russian officials.

"Our Australian embassy in Moscow has also made representations to secure a positive outcome," he said.

A diplomatic source told Australia's national broadcaster ABC that the government believed the video was legitimate and was working to determine when it was filmed.

Foreign Acting Minister Mark Dreyfus urged the Russian government to "fully adhere to its obligations under international humanitarian law, including with respect to prisoners of war".

"Our immediate priority is understanding where Mr Jenkins is and confirming his well-being," Dreyfus said.

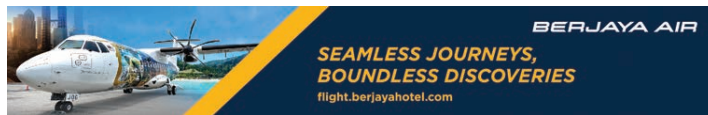
He added that his department was providing support to Jenkins' family and urged Australians not to travel to Ukraine.

Ukrainian-born Kateryna Argyrou, who runs the Australian Federation of Ukrainian Organisations, said she felt

"sick" when she saw the video of Jenkins.

"I was also surprised and touched to hear him speaking Ukrainian," she told the *Sydney Morning Herald* newspaper.

"He'd really made an effort to learn the language. He wasn't afraid to say all he wanted to do was help Ukraine. We need to bring him home. He's one of our own." – AFP



EV wars and shift in automotive industry

“IF there are no trade barriers established, they (Chinese EV manufacturers) will pretty much demolish most other car companies in the world. They're extremely good.” - *Elon Musk, Tesla Motors CEO*

Another key page is being written in the battle over car-and-related-vehicular manufacturing. The importance of automotive manufacturing in the world industrial system cannot be underestimated.

Car manufacturing in the United States, United Kingdom, some European Union countries, Japan and South Korea has contributed substantially to the economic growth and prosperity of these countries.

In addition to the tens of millions directly employed, a larger number work in the supply chain and related services. The industry is an important component of the taxable base of countries as well as a key indicator of the standard of living of the citizenry.

Ever since its origin, the industry has been dominated by the use of internal combustion engines (ICE). However, in an unexpected and rapid shift, electric vehicles (EV) have transformed the industry, catching nations that have monopolised ICE vehicle production off guard.

Since their early market introduction after 2010, the growth of the EV component in the car industry has been spectacular. Today, EV sales are growing even more rapidly. They are now expected to overtake ICE sales sooner than expected for several reasons.

Advantages of EV over ICE

Firstly the price gap between EV and ICE has closed and is at parity in some markets already. Secondly, car manufacturers are now compelled by the latest fuel efficiency standards to offer more fuel-efficient vehicles of which EV have a tremendous advantage.

It is estimated that EV convert up to 91% of energy into power while ICE only convert about 12% to 30%. Perhaps the most important factor for car buyers is the lower total cost of EV ownership, with the savings from lower fuel and maintenance

costs outweighing any higher upfront costs.

Today, we are witnessing a scramble amongst previously dominant ICE manufacturing countries to adjust to this. This adjustment development has become one of the most important battlefields in geopolitics. It is taking place because the world's leader in EV is China.

Over the past decade, China has become the world's largest EV market, commanding half of the global sales of electric passenger cars and over 90% of the sales of electric buses and trucks.

What is unacceptable to the West and other major ICE manufacturing countries is that China produces two-thirds of the world's EV, accounting for just as much of global sales, and is also the world's leader in EV batteries, which make up a significant component of EV cost.

The marketability of Chinese EV is further reinforced by their innovations in software, design and increasingly, in overall quality.

Perhaps the most telling and worrying statistical evidence of the prominence of China in the global automotive industry - worrying, that is, for anti-China politicians and policymakers in the West and its allies - is China's displacement of Japan as the world's leading car exporter.

In 2023, Japan exported 4.42 million vehicles, according to data released by the Japan Automobile Manufacturers Association. This compared with the 4.91 million vehicles shipped from China, according to the China Association of Automobile Manufacturers.

Regional battlefield strategies

The offensive to take down this Chinese “threat” began several years ago. Today, it has morphed into a no-holds-barred politics plus economics, plus media propaganda battle to ensure that the dominance of ICE in the world's automotive industry remains intact, and China's EV, whatever their advantages and clear superiority over fossil-based ICE on the environment, are pulled down.

What we are seeing is the emergence of three distinct regional strategies. The



“What is unacceptable to the West and other major ICE manufacturing countries is that China produces two-thirds of the world's EV, accounting for just as much of global sales, and is also the world's leader in EV batteries, which make up a significant component of EV cost.”



Over the past decade, China has become the world's largest EV market, commanding half of the global sales of electric passenger cars and over 90% of the sales of electric buses and trucks. - **BERNAMAPIC**

first, adopted initially by the US, saw the Joe Biden administration attempt to slow down the rate of change by US-based auto manufacturers by lowering pollutant standards.

This was followed by the ramping up of tariffs on China EV and batteries despite the knowledge that it would slow down the nation's clean-air and zero emissions targets.

Donald Trump's election will see a further use of the high tariff wall strategy on Chinese EV and other exports to the US.

In Europe, the policy strategy, while claiming to want to avoid a trade war with China, has followed a similar higher tariff wall approach although this has been complicated by the highly profitable position that some European car manufacturers such as Mercedes Benz, BMW, Porsche and Audi have enjoyed in China for over 20 years, and are still reliant on to stay afloat and support their bottom line.

The EU tariffs are currently on hold as European ICE manufacturers negotiate with their governments not to follow the US example. They are reminding that an anti-China EV policy is a zero-sum game that will hurt Europe more than China.

The last of the regional players to

emerge is Japan where according to Carlos Ghosn, the ex-chairman of Nissan, the two giants of the car industry - Honda and Nissan - recently announced consolidation and possibly merger plans to meet the challenges of a transformed automotive industry at the behest of the country's powerful international trade ministry.

The discussion while not specifying China clearly aims at bringing together the formidable technological expertise and financial resources of the two companies to survive the turbulence generated by China's EV progress.

The impact of regional and global battles on car buyers in Malaysia and Southeast Asia is not clear yet, given the historic and current dominance of legacy car manufacturers in our part of the world.

But if this battle results in cheaper, cleaner, higher-quality vehicles and is less costly to maintain, then many, possibly most consumers in Southeast Asia and other parts of the world, irrespective of which country they are from, will welcome it.

Lim Teck Ghee's Another Take is aimed at demystifying social orthodoxy. Comments: letters@thesundaily.com

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Intercultural links in Christmas joy

TODAY is the day to joyfully greet your Christian friends here as well as abroad through internet connections, with "Merry Christmas" in whatever languages best suit your overseas pals. Try saying it in Chinese (*Shengdan Kuaile*), Korean (*Meri Keuriseumaseu*), Tamil (*Meri Kiristhumas*), French (*Joyeux Noel*) or Portuguese (*Feliz Natal*).

But you may be surprised to learn that "Merry Christmas" was said only in Latin (*Felicem Natalem Christi*) after formal liturgical prayers throughout Europe during the Middle Ages.

Latin was the sacred language of Christianity in Western Europe during the Middle Ages due to its central role in worship, scripture, education and ecclesiastical authority. In those days, the primary translation of the Bible in use was the Latin Vulgate, dating back to the fourth century.

The monopolistic hold of Latin on Christian liturgical practice was broken only during the Reformation in the 15th century. From then on, it became a steady progression for worship services to be conducted in local European languages.

By the late 1960s, almost all churches around the world had switched to the local languages of each country for their worship services. Latin could still be used as an option for the highly tradition-minded.

However, there is one major drawback in breaking the monopolistic hold of sacred language: the power of a single language to unify a worldwide congregation is also broken.

But there exists a compensatory mechanism: Reformation leaders and Catholic popes since 1962 believe there is also one major advantage: disrupting the hold of monoculturalism helps establish the pathway of multiculturalism as a means to unite diverse humanity.

Scholars of civilisational histories recognise the intercultural linkages that connected India and China, and the intercultural linkages that connected West Asia and Europe as one mega-regional network of civilisations.

All world-class academics are well aware of the West Asia-Europe linkages. J.G. Frazer, a fellow of Trinity College in Cambridge, wrote extensively on this subject in his thick 1922 scholarly work *The Golden Bough*. The *Financial Times* newspaper in London devoted a broadsheet-length article to describe these intercultural linkages in its Christmas issue of 1988.

European Christians, accepting



"All our lives are enriched by diversity, and no expression of diversity is more powerful than intercultural linkages."



The pine tree became the Christmas tree in Europe because of its evergreen character that denotes everlasting life.

— ADIB RAWI YAHYA/THESUN

well-researched scholarly works, have accepted the discovery that there are commonalities shared by the West Asia-Europe network and the India-China network of civilisations.

Around the world, many people lack awareness of these intercultural linkages and shared commonalities, preferring instead to confine themselves within high-walled religious silos.

Continued lack of interest in shared commonalities and intercultural linkages will eventually produce one major deleterious effect in all religions across most parts of the world — a failure to strive for the establishment of global human unity to fight climate change. We shall delve into this topic in a sustained way next year.

Let us focus on Christmas today and see what are the intercultural linkages and shared commonalities that link cultures, religions and civilisations to one another.

One question: On which day of the year do all Christians celebrate Christmas? Answer: There is no such day. More than 12 countries mark Jan 6 or Jan 7 as Christmas Day.

The reason is that the Gospels provide no specific date or time of year for Jesus' birth. Early Christians may have chosen dates based on liturgical reasons or theological calculations rather than historical accuracy. Malaysians follow the Western tradition of celebrating the festival on Dec 25, a date fixed in fourth century CE.

However, Christmas Day was not a blockbuster celebration until Christians later that century decided to combine it with the Winter Solstice

festival so that the two became one. In most years, Winter Solstice falls on Dec 21 or Dec 22. But some 1,500-2,000 years ago, Winter Solstice fell on Dec 25 as reckoned by the not-so-accurate Julian Calendar then in use.

More dazzling than the Winter Solstice in China, Korea and Vietnam, that is celebrated with tang yuan or glutinous rice balls dessert, the Winter Solstice in pre-Christian Roman-ruled Western Europe was a time of great revelry to mark the coming rebirth of the Sun after the longest night of the year.

Troops of boys and girls went from house to house singing and ringing bells. The boys wore white to depict the retreat of winter, while the girls wore red and green to depict the colours of spring revival on the way.

It made sense to ride on the Winter Solstice cheer to celebrate Christmas and to incorporate such joyous elements as carol singing, ringing of bells and dressing up in white, red and green that became the colours of Christmas. This is the dynamism of intercultural linkage.

Now we come to the most evident sign of Christmas everywhere — the Christmas tree. This tree bears universal symbolism as many cultures around the world recognise the tree's allegorical significance.

Three thousand years before Jesus' birth, an illustration in the ancient Iraqi civilisation of Babylonia showed a child gazing at his mother goddess Ishtar, who is seated beside the Tree of Life.

Ancient Egypt of 3500 BCE honoured the divine child called Osiris and the "plant of Osiris" that was identical to the Tree of Life. In Greece of 700 BCE, the divine child

was called Dionysus who was always featured with his sacred ivy plant, and in Rome of 200 BCE, the divine child was called Bacchus, with whom the holly plant is identified.

So noticeable were these shared commonalities — and there were several that carried theological significance — that the fourth century Saint Augustine proclaimed: "The very thing now called the Christian religion was not wanting among the ancients from the beginning of the human race."

Appreciation of the tree's value is a shared commonality in cultures spread across the world. Budha achieved enlightenment in the northern Indian state of Bihar while meditating under a Bodhi tree, which to this day is planted in temples.

The Bodhi tree is more commonly known as fig tree or Ficus (its botanical name). As the indigenous species grows well in Malaysia, we can use Ficus as a Christmas tree to signify the coming of light into our lives. The pine tree became the Christmas tree in Europe because of its evergreen character that denotes everlasting life. The local Ficus is of course evergreen, and the large leaves denote generosity in giving.

The Buddha's awakening under the Bodhi tree is often described metaphorically as the opening of the "eye of Dharma", signifying the complete understanding of truth. Jesus too pictured the eye in a metaphorical sense. "The lamp of the body is the eye. If, therefore, your eye is good, your whole body will be full of light" (Matthew 6:22).

The eye is also used metaphorically by Krishna when he

bestowed spiritual wisdom on his great disciple Arjuna: "But you are not able to behold Me with your own eyes; I give you the divine eye; behold My lordly Yoga" (*Bhagavad Gita* 11:8).

All our lives are enriched by diversity, and no expression of diversity is more powerful than intercultural linkages. Let every festivity be an occasion for all Malaysians to celebrate their unity through diversity.

As culinary dishes always lead the way, everyone should follow this nutritious trail. Malay foods, such as *nasi lemak* and *belacan*, are a delight for Indians and Chinese as well. Who has not relished the filling *chapati* dipped in nutritious *dhal* gravy? It is a favourite even among Chinese and Malays. Who has not tasted *har mee* and *char kuay teow* served up by Chinese street food hawkers?

There are some Malaysians who take *nasi lemak* for breakfast, *char kuay teow* for lunch and *chapati* for dinner. What a great testimony to the power of intercultural linkages to unite diverse communities of people.

At Christmas, let us share the light of joyful giving and national togetherness, for surely you will have noticed that in all religious festivities, the devotees light up their homes to signify the coming of light into their lives. As Jesus, Buddha, Krishna and other religious founders brought light to the world, so let us brighten the lives of others.

Joachim Ng champions interfaith harmony. Comments: letters@thesundaily.com

Private hospitals should prioritise care over luxury

LETTERS
letters@thesundaily.com

THE rising costs of healthcare and health insurance premiums are a complex and multifaceted issue.

However, one key factor that deserves greater scrutiny and has been overlooked is the extravagant spending by private hospitals on lavish premises, particularly opulent spacious lobbies.

Some private hospitals seem to be in a race to outdo one another, competing for the title of "best lobby in town".

These lobbies, often resembling luxury hotel foyers, are undoubtedly impressive, but are they truly necessary?

Such lavish and unnecessary investments, such as having a huge aquarium in the lobby, along with their continual maintenance costs, inevitably contribute to higher operational expenses.

Sadly, these costs are frequently passed

down to patients, resulting in skyrocketing medical bills and higher insurance premiums.

While it is reasonable to expect hospitals to provide clean, comfortable and welcoming environments for patients, there is a clear distinction between essential facilities and unnecessary extravagance.

Investments should focus on areas that directly improve patient care and outcomes, such as advanced medical equipment, better staff training and critical infrastructure.

Spending on aesthetics that do not enhance medical quality is counterproductive and inflates healthcare costs unnecessarily.

Hospital managements must rethink their priorities. Patient care should be at the heart of all investments.

Building grandiose lobbies to impress the wealthy does little to serve the broader population or alleviate the financial burden on patients and insurers.

Pola Singh

IN today's dynamic business environment, the significance of Environmental, Social and Governance (ESG) principles is gaining recognition, signifying a profound move towards embedding sustainability into the core of business operations.

This shift highlights a broader perspective on a company's societal responsibilities, blending profitability with positive global impacts. In this context, the logistics industry emerges as a pivotal player, adopting sustainable practices and leveraging technology to streamline supply chains in an environmentally conscious manner.

Players in the logistics sector are investing their efforts into minimising their environmental impact from multiple angles, including pick-up and delivery route optimisation, vehicle efficiency and modernisation, and a shift towards renewable energy. These efforts highlight the sector's commitment to science-based carbon emission reduction targets.

This initiative is crucial for the transportation sector to fulfil global warming limits set by the Paris Agreement and address its significant contribution to global carbon dioxide emissions.

Globally, industries have committed to reducing emissions to limit global warming to a 1.5°C increase, as per the Paris Agreement, to mitigate climate change risks. However, with the transport sector responsible for a substantial portion of CO2 emissions in 2020, it is clear that more aggressive action is required to meet these targets.

In Malaysia, these global sustainability trends find a strong echo, with targeted initiatives aimed at bolstering the logistics sector's efforts.

The country's commitment to curbing greenhouse gas emissions in proportion to its Gross Domestic Product (GDP) by 2030 exemplifies the logistics sector's critical role in Malaysia's sustainability journey.

Role of data in driving sustainability
The pivotal role of data in bolstering sustainability initiatives is evident, serving as a cornerstone for strategic decision-making and operational enhancements. Specifically, within logistics, data-driven analysis in various parts of operations reduces carbon emissions and supports the transition towards renewable energy. This

How data supports sustainability initiatives

Logistics sector plays integral role in environmental stewardship

strategic application of data not only aligns with the Paris Agreement's objectives but also positions companies like FedEx to set a precedent.

Data supports sustainable initiatives within companies in several critical aspects:

- **Measurement and Monitoring:** Data enables companies to measure their environmental impact, essential for setting goals and tracking progress.
- **Identifying Opportunities:** Analysis helps pinpoint areas for sustainability improvements, such as energy usage and waste reduction.
- **Optimising Resource Use:** Data allows for better resource management, reducing costs and environmental footprint.
- **Decision-Making Support:** Provides insights for informed decisions on suppliers, investments and product designs aligned with sustainability.
- **Compliance and Reporting:** Ensures accurate sustainability reporting and regulatory compliance, avoiding fines and reputational damage.
- **Innovation and Continuous Improvement:** Fosters development of sustainable products and processes, enabling continuous strategy enhancement.

Leveraging data-driven insights, businesses can track carbon output, identify improvement areas and set precise sustainability goals. This visibility helps meet carbon neutrality targets effectively. Throughout the project lifecycle - from assessment to outcome and evaluation - this strategic use of technology ensures continuous advancement towards a greener future.

The strategic sustainability approach at FedEx, supported by concrete data-driven goals and targets in various segments, is founded on three core principles: Reduce, Replace, Revolutionise.

This methodical framework facilitates precise tracking and measurement of environmental impacts, guiding the implementation of initiatives aimed at reducing emissions and waste, enhancing the efficiency of technologies and vehicles and pioneering innovations in fleets and facilities to achieve responsible resource use.

Through emission and waste reduction, upgrading to more efficient technologies and vehicles, and innovating fleets and facilities, FedEx aims at using resources in a more responsible manner. Collective efforts have led to a 48% decrease in carbon dioxide emissions intensity between FY09 and FY23, despite a 121% growth in average daily package volumes.

Initiatives like fuel reduction in the fleet, increasing facility energy efficiency and optimising the recyclability of packaging are key to lessening the environmental impact. An essential objective is converting the entire pickup and delivery fleet to electric vehicles (EVs) by 2040, aspiring for 100% of FedEx Express Pickup and Delivery (PUD) vehicle purchases to be

zero-tailpipe emission electric vehicles (EVs) by 2030. Modernising facilities and aircraft and adopting 100% recyclable packaging further FedEx sustainability commitments.

Cross-border delivery EV trial

The first cross-border delivery EV trial from Malaysia to Singapore at FedEx represents a significant advancement in sustainable logistics, aligning with Malaysia's environmental goals.

This trial that covered 406km, focusing on data collection and operational insights, signifies FedEx move towards reducing its carbon footprint through environmentally responsible operations while demonstrating a reduction of tailpipe CO2 emissions of approximately 100kg as opposed to diesel-powered vehicles.

The insights gained are vital for improving FedEx operational efficiency and customer experience, contributing to the broader goal of transitioning FedEx fleet to zero-emission vehicles by 2040.

During the trial, we closely monitored the time and efficiencies associated with EV charging. For instance, it took 40 minutes on a 90kW charger to achieve a 48% battery gain.

The EV charging rate decreases once the battery reaches 80% capacity - charging at approximately 82kWh below 80% and dropping to about 25kWh above this threshold.

This data is vital as it enables us to evaluate the efficiency of EVs in our fleet operations involving hundreds of PUD vehicles. Understanding these dynamics helps us prepare future plans to deploy EVs more effectively, including ensuring adequate access to charging stations.

Ultimately, it paves the way for us to minimise our environmental footprint as we transition to more sustainable vehicle solutions.

Vehicle range analysis is equally crucial for selecting the most suitable

EV model for our operations. We observed that EVs are more efficient at lower speeds, consuming less energy per kilometre.

Additionally, it is important to note that the range tested during the cross-border delivery EV trial represents the maximum distance achievable on a single charge when the vehicle is not carrying any cargo.

We understand the volume of packages loaded on the truck will impact the range, indicating that real-world operational conditions could lead to variations in these results.

This insight is critical as we plan for the future, enabling us to choose vehicles that align with the specific demands and operational realities of our fleet, ensuring efficiency and sustainability in our logistics network.

These efforts to integrate advanced digital solutions like FedEx Sustainability Insights (FSI) and practical data into our business are mirrored in our wider sustainability responsibilities. FSI is designed to support our customers' sustainability goals by providing them with detailed environmental data on their shipments moving through the FedEx network, enabling businesses, such as major global manufacturers in Southeast Asia, to measure impact and implement data-driven environmental initiatives.

The commitment to achieve vehicle electrification, fuel conversation, investing in energy efficiency initiatives and renewable energy, and offering end-to-end sustainability for customer supply chains through data and packaging solutions are all in harmony with Malaysia's sustainability ambitions.

This highlights the logistics sector's integral role in national and global environmental stewardship.

This article is contributed by FedEx Malaysia managing director Woon Tien Long (pic).



ESG leadership handbook for public administrators launched

PENANG: A significant milestone in Malaysia's sustainability journey was achieved recently as the Centre for Sustainable Research ESG & Technology (CSRET) unveiled *ESG Leadership in Public Sectors: A Practical Handbook for Public Administrators* at a book launch in Penang.

This groundbreaking handbook is an effort to redefine public sector leadership through the lens of ESG (Environmental, Social, and Governance) principles.

Aligning closely with Malaysia's Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), the book serves as a comprehensive roadmap for public administrators to drive sustainable governance and foster meaningful contributions to global sustainability efforts.

In his foreword, the Yang di-Pertua Negeri of Penang Tun Ahmad Fuzi Abdul Razak highlighted the

handbook's pivotal role in advancing sustainable development. He described it as an indispensable resource and a call to action for public administrators to champion a new governance paradigm.

"As we navigate an increasingly complex and interconnected world, the principles outlined in this handbook will serve as a beacon, guiding the public sector towards a sustainable and equitable future."

Co-authored by Datuk Seri Dr. Ahmad Jailani Muhamed Yunus, Leong Hong Kit, and Hamzah Hamzah, the 16-chapter handbook delves into diverse topics, including the integration of AI governance and ethics into public sector leadership.

It provides actionable strategies and sector-specific insights, equipping leaders with the tools needed to address emerging



Guests gathered in support of the book launch.

challenges and seize opportunities for sustainable development.

The book's launch also marked a celebration of Malaysia's growing commitment to sustainability.

ESG Leadership in Public Sectors empowers leaders with practical

frameworks to reshape governance and policy implementation, enabling them to play a central role in building a more resilient and sustainable society.

The handbook is set to inspire a new wave of ESG-driven innovation

and collaboration within the public sector.

It aims to nurture leaders who are committed to embedding ESG principles in governance practices, ensuring a brighter, more sustainable future for Malaysia and beyond.



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Get ready to comply with EECA, M'sian companies told

➤ Newly approved Energy Efficiency and Conservation Act 2024 aims to regulate consumption and promote conservation across various sectors

PETALING JAYA: Malaysian companies must brace for stricter compliance requirements when the newly approved Energy Efficiency and Conservation Act 2024 (EECA) - which expands the scope of current laws - is implemented, said Malaysian Association of Registered Electrical Energy Managers president Zaini Abdul Wahab (pic).

He said that while multinational companies, especially those from the United States, the European Union and Japan, are well-prepared, local companies may struggle to adapt.

The EECA is aimed at regulating energy consumption and promoting energy conservation across various sectors. It sets out guidelines, standards and regulations to ensure sustainable energy use in Malaysia. The official date of enforcement has not yet been determined.

"Many Malaysian companies only meet the minimum requirements to avoid trouble with the authorities, but the new Act demands much more - including mandatory energy audits and comprehensive energy manage-

ment systems. Only 25% to 30% of Malaysian companies are expected to be ready when the new law takes effect," he told *SunBiz*.

The compliance rate under the current law exceeds 70%, but Zaini said this figure reflects adherence to minimum requirements and cannot be directly compared to the new standards. He estimates that around 3,000 companies will be affected, up from the current 1,800. "If 25%-30% of companies are prepared

under the new Act, that would already be a positive start," he said.

Zaini highlighted that even large government-linked companies are often unprepared because energy management has not been a core focus for them.

He said that while some GLCs have sustainability programmes, most lack comprehensive energy management systems.

Currently, Malaysia has only about 50-60 companies certified under ISO 50001, compared to over 400 in Thailand. This is a standard for improving, effective

and sustainable use of energy resources through an energy management system.

"Most certified companies here are multinationals because of corporate mandates, not local initiatives," Zaini explained.

He said compliance is often driven by market requirements, such as the need for carbon footprint information for products exported to Europe. "Failure to comply will impact business potential, reputation, and market access."

The EECA introduces changes including mandatory energy audits every five years and the inclusion of thermal energy such as fuel, gas, and chilled water, in addition to electricity.

It also requires companies to establish energy management systems, including creating an energy policy, forming an energy management committee, and

setting targets, guided by standards such as ISO 50001.

Zaini reckoned that achieving 50% compliance within three years of enforcement would be a significant milestone. "From my experience, it takes time for companies to align with new laws and reach even the minimum requirements," he said.

Zaini stressed the importance of enforcement by the Energy Commission and the readiness of key players such as energy managers. "If a company hires an energy manager who lacks the necessary skills, such as developing an effective energy management system, compliance won't be achieved," he said.

The new Act provides clearer guidelines for the roles of energy managers and auditors, making enforcement easier for the commission and compliance more straightforward for companies.



FY24 income distribution of 5.75 sen declared for ASB, strongest in five years

PETALING JAYA: Permodalan Nasional Bhd's (PNB) wholly owned unit trust management company, Amanah Saham Nasional Bhd (ASN), has declared a total income distribution of 5.75 sen a unit for its flagship fund, Amanah Saham Bumiputera (ASB), for the financial year ending Dec 31, 2024 (FY24).

The total distribution consists of an income distribution of 5.5 sen a unit and a bonus of 0.25 sen a unit. The total payout amounts to RM10.1 billion and will benefit 11.1 million ASB unit-holders. This year's 5.75 sen per unit dividend, higher than last year's 5.25 sen, brings the total dividends paid out since its launch to RM1196.5 billion.

The number of ASB accounts rose by 2.4% to 11.1 million, showing that Bumiputeras continue to trust it as a reliable savings and investment option.

PNB Group chairman Raja Tan Sri Arshad Raja Tun Uda said ASB has delivered its strongest dividend distribution in five years.

"This continues the strong track record of outperformance of ASN's fixed price funds over their reference portfolio in line with PNB's purpose to uplift the financial lives of Malaysians across generations," he said in a statement.

ASB continues to deliver sustainable, above-market returns, outperforming the benchmark of Maybank's 12-month fixed deposit rate.

ASB's better performance was supported by PNB's asset diver-

sification strategy and the strong Malaysian equity market, boosted by solid economic growth and a stronger ringgit.

"Despite the continuing geopolitical and global trade tensions, the Malaysian macroeconomic environment was positive, supported by robust domestic demand, stable interest rates and increased foreign investment, attributable to strong investors' response to the government's initiatives, including the launch of the New Industrial Master Plan.

National Energy Transition Roadmap, and the Government-Linked Entities Activation and Reform Programme," Arshad said.

ASN's variable-price funds delivered a strong performance in 2024. All funds exceeded their benchmarks and ranked among peers in the top two quartiles.

By November, the six ASN Equity Funds achieved rolling one-year total returns of 15% to 33%, with Amanah Saham Nasional (ASN) and ASN Equity Malaysia recording returns of 23.4% and 33.2%, respectively. Further, in 2024, PNB's assets under management (AUM) increased to RM347 billion from RM337 billion in 2023.

The total number of accounts increased by 3.2% to 16.2 million, with ASN adding more than 400,000 new unique holders to now being the preferred investment of choice of more than 13 million Malaysians.

However, encouraging Malaysians to save remains a critical challenge, with RinggitPlus Malaysian Financial

Literacy Survey findings showing more than 40% of Malaysian adults have yet to start financial planning for their retirement and Bank Negara Malaysia (BNM) data suggests voluntary savings (excluding Employees Provident Fund contribution) growth to be less than 5% over the last five years.

To address these challenges, PNB has focused on growing its customers' savings under its new strategic plan, LEAP 6. The strategic plan outlined an ambitious target to grow PNB's AUM to RM400 billion by 2027 through the execution of transformation across six key pillars covering sales and distribution, investment, PNB Co transformation, knowledge, innovation and sustainability.

Among others, the year saw PNB's continuous commitment to enhancing financial literacy among Malaysians with its flagship financial literacy carnival, Minggu Saham Amanah Malaysia, recording more than 100,000 visitors this year.

PNB president and group CEO Datuk Abdul Rahman Ahmad said going forward, the company will expand these efforts by transforming its sales and distribution model and aggressively promoting savings to all Malaysians.

"Immediate action will be activating several campaigns to promote recurring savings by Malaysians through the Auto Labur feature in the ASN app, which lets investors invest regularly and automatically with as little as RM10 per month," he said.

PNB optimistic about local economy, bourse next year

KUALA LUMPUR: Permodalan Nasional Bhd (PNB) remains optimistic about the outlook for Malaysia's economy and local bourse next year, underpinned, among others, by clear economic policies and steady inflows of foreign direct investments (FDI).

President and group chief executive Datuk Abdul Rahman Ahmad said policies such as the National Energy Transition Roadmap and the National Semiconductor Strategy have been well received, bolstering investor confidence.

He also noted that the country is currently experiencing a third wave of investment upcycle, which was contributed greatly by FDI inflow.

"The combination of well-received economic policies, strong FDI inflows driven by electrical and electronics sector data centres, and robust domestic direct investments indicates real activity on the ground. This positive trend reflects the close relationship between the economy and the stock market. I believe that the momentum we have in 2024 will continue in 2025," he said during an editors' briefing at Menara 118.

Currently, 77% of PNB's assets are invested domestically, with 60% of that allocation in the public equity market, mainly in the FTSE Bursa Malaysia Kuala Lumpur Composite Index (FBM KLCI), Abdul Rahman said.

"One potential risk is that while the Malaysian economy performs

well, this has not yet translated into better earnings or performance for corporate Malaysia," he added when asked about concerns that can derail the projection next year.

When asked about potential merger and acquisition (M&A) activities following the Sime Darby-UMW Holdings Bhd deal, Abdul Rahman emphasised that PNB's priority is ensuring Sapura Energy Bhd completes its debt restructuring.

"Sapura Energy's debt restructuring scheme has been extended to March 2025, and completing this process is vital for stabilising its operations," he said, adding that PNB is not currently pursuing M&A activities in the oil and gas sector.

On Velesto Energy Bhd, where PNB holds a 54% stake, Abdul Rahman declined to comment further, noting that discussions regarding potential divestment are ongoing.

On June 6 this year, it was reported that Sapura Energy was granted a nine-month extension by the High Court to the convening and restraining orders that the group obtained from the court in March 2024, allowing it to continue restructuring its debts. The new orders are effective from June 11, 2024, to March 10, 2025.

PNB stated it remains focused on reviewing its portfolio performance, taking a bottom-up approach to identify companies with strong organic growth potential. - Bernama



Hyatt Place Kuala Lumpur Bukit Jalil makes its mark

BY JOHN GILBERT
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KUALA LUMPUR: Hyatt Place Kuala Lumpur Bukit Jalil has achieved a healthy occupancy rate this year and expects the positive momentum to continue through 2025, given the Asia-Pacific region's projected occupancy rate of 63.2% by the end of this year.

However, general manager Captain Bennett Peter said while occupancy provides some insights, profits – not occupancy – truly reflect a hotel's financial success.

"Achieving the right balance is essential. The optimal mix of occupancy and average room rates helps maximise revenue and increase profitability," he told *SunBiz*.

Peter said that, as a new player in the hospitality industry, and just one year after opening, Hyatt Place Kuala Lumpur Bukit Jalil has already carved a niche as the very first Hyatt Place brand in the country and the first international hotel brand to open its doors in Bukit Jalil.

"Being strategically located in one of the most vibrant destinations in Kuala Lumpur, we have seen an increase in occupancy during international concerts and world-class sporting events and exhibitions.

"A month after we opened, we were already profitable with a positive cash flow, taking the lead among opened hotels the year. We expect this momentum to carry through into 2025 with a healthy gross operating profit," Peter said.

Touching on the brand, Peter said Hyatt will expand its presence in Malaysia by opening several hotels, namely Hyatt Centric Kuala Lumpur City Centre, Park Hyatt Kuala Lumpur and Hyatt Regency Kuala Lumpur Midtown.

"As for the Hyatt Place brand, we were the first to open in Malaysia in 2023 and the second in Southeast Asia, followed by the opening of Hyatt Place Johor Bahru Paradigm Mall shortly after. The Hyatt Place Kuala Lumpur Bukit Jalil is also currently the largest

► International hotel expects healthy occupancy to continue into 2025, says number of 'bleisure' travellers increasing



Peter says while occupancy provides some insights, profits truly reflect a hotel's financial success.

Hyatt Place brand hotel in Southeast Asia."

Hyatt Place Kuala Lumpur Bukit Jalil is also seeing a rise in the number of combined business and leisure travellers, or "bleisure" travellers, and expects this trend to continue, Peter said.

"People want to gain the most out of their time whenever they travel. Hyatt Place Kuala Lumpur Bukit Jalil is exactly the place to live, work and play.

"We are also noticing that many more millennial travellers and digital nomads are being more selective about where they prefer to stay. They opt for hotels with complimentary full Wi-Fi, a work-and-play space,

sustainable practices, and 24/7 refreshment options," Peter said.

He added that Malaysia is competing with the rest of Southeast Asia for tourism receipts, and hotel operators need to stay alert, agile and strategic to stay ahead.

"In addition to targeting foreign visitors, the Malaysian traveller (business and leisure) has formed a significant share of the business we captured in our first year. This will continue to drive the growth in our revenue per available room and gross operating profits, which are very important metrics to safeguard in order to sustain the success of our business," Peter said.

MJets Air acquires Boeing B737-400SF converted freighter, its seventh aircraft

PETALING JAYA: MJets Air Sdn Bhd, a subsidiary of MMAG Aviation Consortium Sdn Bhd under MMAG Holdings Bhd, has acquired its seventh aircraft, a Boeing B737-400SF converted freighter, from JPA No. 161 Co Ltd.

The acquisition will lead MJets Air's ambitious plan to expand its fleet to 13 aircraft by the end of 2025, reinforcing its position as a key player in the regional air cargo market.

MJets Air operates a fleet of six leased aircraft, which have been instrumental in meeting growing market demands. The seventh aircraft marks the company's first owned freighter, signifying a strategic shift toward ownership to enhance cost control, operational flexibility, and long-term growth.

MJets Air chairman Woo Kam Weng said the acquisition marks a significant step forward in the company's mission to lead the regional air cargo market and strengthen its role as a key feeder operator.

"With a target fleet of 13 aircraft by the end of 2025, this expansion addresses the overwhelming demand for air cargo services, which has outpaced our current capacity. Due to limited aircraft availability, we have been unable to accept new bookings or charters, making this acquisition critical for meeting growing customer demands, enhancing service reliability, and delivering greater value to our stakeholders," he said in a statement.

The strategic move is driven by the overwhelming demand for air cargo services, which has outpaced expectations and far exceeded MJets Air's current capacity.

The addition of the freighter is a critical step towards addressing this capacity gap, enabling MJets Air to meet market demands better and seize untapped opportunities in the growing air cargo industry.

In recent months, MJets Air has solidified key strategic partnerships to enhance its network and operational capabilities.

Collaborations with MasKargo, Teleport, China Southern Airways, and All Nippon Airways have significantly strengthened its connectivity in high-demand routes across Southeast Asia, Hong Kong, China and India. Additionally, partnerships with key cargo sales agents have optimised capacity utilisation and expanded customer reach.

InDrive on fast lane to growth, riding on unique pricing model

PETALING JAYA: InDrive, a global leader in mobility and urban services, reported 20% growth in rides and 21% increase in active users in Malaysia in the first half of 2024, highlighting its strong presence in the country and Southeast Asia.

The growth coincides with the platform reaching a major milestone of five billion completed deals worldwide by September 2024, showcasing its expanding global footprint and innovative strategies.

Active driver numbers are also on the rise, with a 23% increase expected by the end of 2024 to meet the growing demand for equitable and flexible ride-hailing solutions.

The platform's emphasis on transparency and inclusivity has positioned it as a preferred choice among Malaysians seeking fairer mobility options.

The fifth billion deal, completed in Peru, highlights InDrive's expanding global reach since its inception in 2012.

Known for its unique bid-based pricing model, the platform allows drivers and passengers to negotiate fares directly, setting it apart in the competitive ride-hailing market.

In Malaysia, this transparent model has resonated with users, contributing to the country's growing ride-hailing sector, projected to grow at a compound growth annual rate of 3.5% from 2024 to 2029, reaching RM2.48 billion in

market volume.

InDrive president and deputy CEO Mark Loughran expressed his gratitude to the global community of users and drivers.

"Crossing the five billion deals milestone is a testament to the global scale InDrive has achieved over the past decade. Each transaction represents more than a ride, it is about making a meaningful impact, whether by creating job opportunities, providing services in underserved areas, or supporting community initiatives through our inVision programme," he said.

The inVision programme, a core part of InDrive's mission, supports sports, arts and educational opportunities in communities where the platform operates.

Loughran emphasised the company's broader goal, saying "Our mission has always been to improve people's lives. With this milestone, we're closer to our goal of positively impacting 1 billion people by 2030."

Beyond ride-sharing, InDrive has diversified its services, extending its bid-based model to intercity transport, courier deliveries, freight services, and urban solutions such as house-keeping and home repairs.

These innovations have helped the platform grow into a multiservice global leader operating across 46 countries.

InDrive's impact over the past 11 years is



InDrive passed the five billion rides milestone worldwide in September.

evident in its achievements.

Passengers have travelled a combined 32 billion kilometres, equivalent to 123,500 years of travel. This reach has propelled the platform from the second-most downloaded mobility app to a global powerhouse in urban mobility and services.

Looking ahead, InDrive continues to expand its operations into new regions, including developed markets, while introducing new services such as financial solutions for drivers. With its ongoing growth, the platform is set to remain a key player in revolutionising global mobility and driving positive social change.

Oriental Interest on strong financial footing

► Forward sales of RM585.5m highlight property developer's capacity to navigate market uncertainties while maintaining growth

■ BY AIMIE SHAZRIE
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PETALING JAYA: Oriental Interest Bhd (OIB) has reinforced its financial stability with forward sales of RM585.5 million, expected to be realised over the next three years.

Chairman Raja Puan Muda of Kedah Che Puan Muda Zaheeda Mohamad Ariff said this strong forward sales position highlights the group's capacity to navigate market uncertainties while maintaining a steady growth trajectory.

"With projects secured, planning permissions granted, financing in place, and construction costs fixed, OIB is well-equipped to deliver on its commitments and drive sustainable value creation," she said in the company's annual report filed with Bursa Malaysia.

She highlighted that the group's strategic landbank and experienced management team position it to

adapt agilely to changing market conditions.

"This adaptability is key to ensuring continued success, even amid an unpredictable operating environment. OIB's proven business model, which balances investment in new opportunities with the optimisation of existing assets, has enabled the group to maintain a focus on cash generation while delivering solid returns for shareholders," she added.

Despite economic challenges, the group reported strong financial performance for the financial year ended Aug 31, 2024 (FY24).

Revenue grew to RM652.5 million, a notable increase from RM534.3 million in FY23, while profit after tax rose to RM101.8 million compared to RM96.6 million the previous year.

OIB's total assets expanded to RM1.8 billion, supported by a cash reserve of RM147.6 million. This demonstrates OIB's ability to

manage short-term challenges while investing in future growth.

OIB successfully delivered 1,714 residential units during the year with a combined GDV of RM912 million.

In addition, the group launched four new projects and new phases of existing developments in key target locations.

Looking ahead, OIB plans to unveil new projects and phases with a GDV of RM1.09 billion, further solidifying its position as a leading property developer.

Zaheeda remarked that OIB's RM585.5 million in unbilled sales ensures earnings visibility over the next three years and underscores OIB's financial resilience.

"This strong foundation allows the group to confidently pursue new opportunities while maintaining operational efficiency and stakeholder value," she said.

She noted that OIB remains committed to curating exceptional living environments where aspirations are transformed into realities.

"As it enters the next phase of growth, the group is poised to capitalise on emerging opportunities in the property sector, driven by innovation, strategic execution and a steadfast focus on sustainable development," Zaheeda added.

MARC Ratings reaffirms MyEG Islamic notes at AA-IS

KUALA LUMPUR: MARC Ratings Bhd has confirmed an AA-IS rating with a stable outlook for MY E.G. Services Bhd's (MyEG) Islamic Medium-Term Notes Programme, valued at up to RM1 billion.

The rating affirmation incorporates MyEG's well-established position as a concessionaire for e-government services, diversified revenue from non-concession businesses, high operating margin and healthy cash flow generation.

The agency said the operational and cross-border risks associated with new business ventures and the potential challenges in increasing the widespread adaptability of MyEG's blockchain platform for businesses are moderating the rating.

"MARC Ratings positively assesses MyEG's ability to successfully leverage its well-established brand to diversify into non-concession-related businesses.

"The brand is associated with key e-government services, particularly the renewal of driving licences for the Road Transport Department and foreign worker permits for the Immigration Department of Malaysia," the rating agency said.

While operating under government concessions generally for three-year terms, MyEG's lengthy track record and established infrastructure mitigate renewal and termination risks.

The rating agency notes that termination had a low impact on the group's credit profile. As of the end of

September 2024, its contribution to group revenue was only a modest 2%, compared to 4% in 2023.

Among MyEG's non-concession businesses, its blockchain platform Zetrix, has seen sharp year-on-year growth since commencing operations at the end of 2023.

Designed to reduce administrative timelines for import and export-related services between China and Malaysia, Zetrix's contribution through the sale of digital assets and its services in October 2023 generated proceeds of RM94.6 million and RM161.8 million in the first half of 2024.

MARC Rating said the likely geographical diversification of Zetrix to the Philippines could diversify revenue from this service.

In addition to being the sole provider of this service to China, MyEG has a mover advantage and a strong information technology infrastructure that provides a competitive edge.

Nonetheless, MARC Ratings noted that MyEG's further growth in this segment will depend on steadily increasing the adaptability of its blockchain platform.

MyEG also earns rental income from its foreign worker hostels. Currently, it has a hostel in Selangor and another in Malacca, which each houses 400 foreign workers.

MyEG is currently developing four hostel projects strategically located to cater to workforce accommodation needs.





Japan watchdog accuses Google of antitrust violation

TOKYO: Japanese authorities will hand Google a cease-and-desist order over an alleged antitrust violation in the first such move against a US tech titan, a government source said.

The Japan Fair Trade Commission (JFTC) accuses Google of breaking the law by imposing "transactions with binding conditions" on Android smartphone manufacturers in Japan.

Specifically, it says Google made sure that its online app store Google Play needed to be installed as part of a package with its web-browser search app Chrome.

"Google Play is so widely used that without it, Android devices are basically unsellable," said

the source, who declined to be identified because the information is not yet public.

The JFTC also believes Google dangled financial incentives to pressure these smartphone makers into excluding rival search apps, said the source.

Such behaviour constitutes "unfair trading practices" banned by the antitrust law, the source said, adding that a cease-and-desist letter would be sent to Google pending a hearing.

Such administrative action is a "fairly strong" measure taken by the JFTC, the source said, and the first against the GAFAM – an abbreviation for

US tech behemoths Google, Amazon, Facebook, Apple and Microsoft.

Google Japan was not immediately available for comment when contacted by AFP.

The move mirrors similar crackdowns on Google in the United States and Europe.

The American government asked a judge last month to order the dismantling of Google by selling its widely used Chrome browser in a major antitrust crackdown on the company.

Meanwhile the European Commission, the EU's executive, recommended last year that Google should sell parts of its business and

could face a fine of up to 10% of its global revenue if it fails to comply.

In Japan, the JFTC is playing hardball with other US tech giants that it sees as behaving in an anti-competitive manner.

Last month, the agency conducted an on-site inspection of Amazon's Japanese subsidiary in Tokyo, accusing it of abusing its industry dominance to drive down prices.

Amazon Japan used its coveted "buy box" – a prominent spot on its website – against sellers, pressuring them into lowering prices to give it a competitive edge over rival e-commerce sites, the JFTC said. – AFP



A food vendor pulling a cart on a street in the central China city of Wuhan. – AFP

China to raise deficit and boost spending next year

➤ **Govt will focus on improving livelihoods and promoting consumption, says minister**

BEIJING: China will raise its deficit in order to boost spending next year, its finance minister said yesterday according to state media, as Beijing looks to prop up its struggling economy.

The world's second-largest economy has for years battled sluggish domestic consumption, a persistent crisis in the property sector and soaring government debt.

Beijing unveiled a slew of aggressive measures this year aimed at bolstering growth – cutting interest rates, cancelling restrictions on

homebuying and easing the debt burden on local governments.

Economists have urged more direct fiscal stimulus to shore up domestic consumption and restore China's economy to full health.

Finance Minister Lan Fo'an said at a conference in Beijing yesterday that China would "increase the fiscal deficit ratio to boost spending intensity," according to state broadcaster CCTV.

Beijing would also focus more on improving livelihoods and promoting sluggish consumption, Lan said, and transfer payments to indebted local governments would be increased.

Beijing has long been reluctant to boost government spending to pull itself out of its economic malaise, fearful of piling on debt.

However, Beijing's leadership committed this month to a "moderately loose" monetary policy and a "more proactive" fiscal policy next year.

The terminology represented a shift away from the government's previous commitment to a more cautious approach.

China is pushing for an official national growth target this year of around 5%, a goal President Xi Jinping has expressed confidence in achieving but which many economists believe it will narrowly miss.

The International Monetary Fund expects China's economy to grow by 4.8% this year and 4.5% next year.

Gary Ng, senior economist for Asia Pacific at Natixis, told AFP the magnitude of new spending may be "lower than it looks on the surface".

"The current policy is also more about managing growth at a reasonably comfortable range for top policymakers rather than boosting growth," Ng said. – AFP

Honda shares soar 16% after buyback announcement

TOKYO: Honda shares soared more than 16% yesterday after the Japanese auto giant announced a buyback of up to ¥1.1 trillion (RM31 billion) the previous day.

The buyback announcement came as Honda and its struggling rival Nissan agreed on Monday to launch talks on a merger seen as a bid to catch up with China firms and Tesla on electric vehicles.

Honda will buy back its own shares worth up to ¥1.1 trillion, or 23.7% of the total issued shares, to improve "efficiency of its capital structure".

"Even with this amount, we are still a little short

as an equity ratio adjustment, but we will start with the largest share buyback we can do at the moment," Honda CEO Toshihiro Mibe told reporters.

"But even if we go that far, we still have a sufficiently strong financial base."

The Honda-Nissan collaboration would create the world's third-largest automaker, expanding development of EVs and self-driving tech.

Honda's CEO insisted that it was not a bailout for Nissan, which announced thousands of job cuts last month and reported a 93% plunge in first-half net profit.

Lacklustre consumer spending and stiff competition in several markets is making life hard for many automakers.

Business has been especially tough for foreign brands in China, where EV manufacturers such as BYD are leading the way as demand grows for less polluting vehicles.

The two firms, along with Mitsubishi Motors, of which Nissan is a majority shareholder, said they had signed a memorandum of understanding to start discussions on integrating their business under a new holding company. – AFP

Xerox to buy printer maker Lexmark in US\$1.5b deal

NEW YORK: Office equipment manufacturer Xerox will buy Chinese-owned printer and printing software maker Lexmark International in a US\$1.5 billion (RM6.7 billion) deal to bolster its mainstay business, the companies said on Monday.

The purchase from Ninestar Corp, PAG Asia Capital and Shanghai Shouda Investment Centre will bring Lexmark back to US ownership.

Formed out of IBM in 1991, Lexmark was sold to a group of Chinese investors in a deal valued at US\$3.6 billion in 2016.

Xerox, a household name globally, has seen its revenue shrink for five straight quarters as demand for printers and related equipment sputtered in the digital age.

The company also faces tough competition from HP and Canon, among others.

Its shares were down more than 50% this year.

The Lexmark deal, which includes its debt, will provide Xerox a much-needed scale to compete better.

The combined company is expected to serve more than 200,000 clients in 170 countries and have a market share among the top five firms globally in various print segments.

The deal would also allow Xerox to expand its presence in the Asia-Pacific region while strengthening its ability to tap customers in the expanding A4 segment, which includes smaller-format printers and copiers commonly used in homes and offices.

Xerox expects to finance the deal, likely to close in the second half of 2025, through a combination of cash on hand and debt financing.

As part of the financing, Xerox is reducing its annual dividend to US\$0.50 per share from US\$1, starting with the one expected to be declared in the first quarter of 2025, to help with its efforts to lower debt.

Xerox said in October it would buy ITsavvy, an Illinois-based IT products firm, for US\$400 million as it looks to expand its IT services business. – Reuters

Apple approaches US\$4 trillion valuation

➤ Jump in share price powered by investor enthusiasm for AI

SAN FRANCISCO: Apple is closing in on a historic US\$4 trillion (RM18 trillion) stock market valuation, powered by investors cheering progress in the company's long-awaited AI enhancements to rejuvenate sluggish iPhone sales.

The company has pulled ahead of Nvidia and Microsoft in the race to the monumental milestone, thanks to a 16% jump in shares since early November that has added about US\$500 billion to its market capitalisation.

The latest rally in Apple shares reflects "investor enthusiasm for artificial intelligence and an expectation that it will result in a supercycle of iPhone upgrades," said Tom Forte, an analyst at Maxim Group, who has a "hold" rating.

Valued at about US\$3.85 trillion as of the last close, Apple dwarfs the combined value of Germany and Switzerland's main stock markets.

The Silicon Valley firm, driven by the so-called iPhone supercycles, was the first American company to hit previous trillion-dollar milestones.

In recent years, the company has attracted criticism for being slow to map out its artificial intelligence strategy, while Microsoft, Alphabet, Amazon and Meta Platforms have pulled ahead to dominate the emerging technology.

Shares of Nvidia, the biggest AI beneficiary, have surged more than 800% over the past two years, compared to the near doubling in shares of Apple during the same period.

Apple earlier this month started integrating OpenAI's ChatGPT into its devices after unveiling plans in June to integrate generative AI technology across its app suite.

The company expects overall revenue to increase "low- to mid-single digits" during its fiscal first quarter - a modest growth forecast for the holiday shopping season - sparking questions about the momentum for the iPhone 16 series.

However, LSEG data showed analysts expect revenue from iPhones to rebound in 2025.

"Although near-term iPhone demand is still muted ... it is a function of limited Apple Intelligence features and geographic availability, and as both broaden, it will help to



A view of an Apple store along Marina Bay in Singapore. - REUTERS/SPIC

drive an improvement in iPhone demand," Morgan Stanley analyst Erik Woodring said in a note, reiterating Apple as the brokerage's "top pick" heading into 2025.

The recent surge in shares has pushed Apple's price-to-earnings ratio to a near three-year high of 33.5, compared to 31.3 for Microsoft and 31.7 for Nvidia, according to LSEG data.

Warren Buffett's Berkshire Hathaway has sold shares of Apple - its top holding - this year, as the conglomerate broadly retreated from equities on concerns over stretched valuations.

"I suspect the stock in three years will not look as expensive as it does today," said Eric Clark, portfolio manager of the Rational Dynamic Brands Fund, which holds Apple shares.

Apple faces the risk of retaliatory tariffs if US President-elect Donald Trump delivers on his promise to slap tariffs of at least 10% on goods coming from China.

"We believe it's likely Apple gets exclusions

on products like iPhone, Mac and iPad, similar to the first round of China tariffs in 2018," Woodring said.

Apple's shares tumbled last Wednesday amid a Wall Street selloff after the Federal Reserve forecast a slower pace of rate cuts next year but investors expect the broad trend of monetary easing to support stock markets next year.

"Technology has been regarded by investors as a new form of a defensive sector because of their earnings growth," said Sam Stovall, chief investment strategist at CFRA Research.

The Fed's action "could end up having a greater impact on some of the other cyclical areas such as consumer discretionary and financials and less so on technology".

"Apple's approach to US\$4 trillion market cap is a testament to its enduring dominance in the tech sector. This milestone reinforces Apple's position as a market leader and innovator," said Adam Sarhan, chief executive officer of 50 Park Investments. - AFP

Canada's economy tops growth forecast in October

OTTAWA: Canada's economy exceeded market expectations with 0.3% growth in October, led by increases in oil and gas extraction and manufacturing, but gross domestic product likely contracted in November, data showed on Monday.

Analysts polled by Reuters had forecast a 0.2% month-over-month rise in October.

September's growth rate was upwardly revised to 0.2% from an initial report of 0.1%, Statistics Canada (Statscan) data showed.

The stronger-than-expected start to the fourth quarter and the upward revision to September's growth rate could assuage some concerns about Canada's economy.

Growth in the third quarter missed the Bank of Canada's (BoC) forecast and the central bank said earlier this month that data suggested the economy may underperform its expectation in the last three months of 2024.

In a preliminary estimate for November, Statscan said GDP likely decreased by 0.1% as declines in sectors including mining, quarrying, and oil and gas extraction and transportation and warehousing were partially offset by increases in accommodation and food services and real estate and rental and leasing.

If November's forecast is confirmed and GDP remains unchanged in December, the economy would fall short of the BoC's 2% growth projection for the fourth quarter.

Growth in October was driven a rebound in the goods-producing industry, which rose 0.9% in October after shrinking for four consecutive months, Statscan data showed.

The services-producing industries edged up 0.1%.

Within the goods-producing industry, the mining, quarrying, and oil and gas extraction sector expanded 2.4% after three straight months of declines, Statscan data showed.

Manufacturing rose 0.3% in October driven by an increase in non-durable goods manufacturing. - Reuters

Hyatt in talks with Playa on options, including buyout

NEW YORK: Hyatt Hotels is in exclusive talks regarding a potential takeover of Playa Hotels & Resorts N.V. among other strategic options for the US\$1.2 billion (RM5.4 billion) resort operator, the companies said on Monday.

Playa, which runs 24 high-end, all-inclusive resorts across Mexico, said its board has been evaluating opportunities and has engaged with a number of potential counterparties.

The exclusive talks with Hyatt, which has a 9.99% stake in Playa, will run through Feb 3 or until a deal is struck, Playa said, cautioning there was no guarantee of any transaction.

Playa is already in a partnership with Hyatt, through which it operates resorts under the Hyatt Ziva and Hyatt Zilara brands. Its market value is US\$1.2 billion, per LSEG data.

"Strategic alternatives under consideration could have compelling strategic merit to add new incremental durable fee streams," Chicago, Illinois-based Hyatt said, although it added it was committed to its asset-light business model.

Companies in the hospitality sector are navigating challenges in global travel demand as US and China consumers remain cautious of macroeconomic trends. - Reuters

US launches probe into China chip industry

WASHINGTON: The United States said on Monday it is opening an investigation into China's policies for its semiconductor industry, over concerns that Beijing is turning to "extensive anticompetitive and non-market means" to undermine other economies.

The probe centres on foundational semiconductors - which go into everything from cars to medical devices - and whether China's actions create burdens for American commerce, according to the US Trade Representative's (USTR) office.

The fear is that Beijing's practices undermine "the competitiveness of American industry and workers, critical US supply chains, and US economic security", the USTR's office added.

"We have seen time and again, a pattern of harmful impact from nonmarket policies and practices across industries that the PRC has targeted for worldwide market dominance," said US Trade Representative Katherine Tai,

referring to the People's Republic of China.

Previous instances have included steel, aluminum, solar cells, electric vehicles and now, semiconductors, Tai told reporters.

"This is enabling its companies to rapidly expand capacity and to offer artificially lower-priced chips that threaten to significantly harm and potentially eliminate fair, market-oriented competition."

Commerce Secretary Gina Raimondo said that an analysis of the US semiconductor supply chain found two-thirds of American products contain Chinese-made foundational chips.

"About half of companies didn't know whether they had Chinese chips in their products," she said, adding that this included firms making defence systems, critical infrastructure and consumer electronics.

In recent years, President Joe Biden has sought to shore up US chipmaking capabilities to reduce reliance on other countries.

The latest probe will initially focus on China's foundational semiconductors production, including the extent that these are used in other products like medical devices and vehicles.

The probe is also expected to consider whether Beijing's policies on inputs for semiconductor fabrication contribute to "burden or restriction on US commerce", the USTR's office said.

"This investigation is part of our broader strategy to strengthen the resilience of our supply chains and revitalise domestic manufacturing," said national economic adviser Lael Brainard.

The investigation falls under Section 301 of the Trade Act, the same tool used during President-elect Donald Trump's first administration to impose tariff hikes on Chinese products.

Officials will have a year to carry out the investigation and decide on responses. - AFP



Biden to decide fate of US-Japan steel deal

Foreign investment panel fails to reach consensus on US\$14.9 billion transaction

WASHINGTON: A US government panel failed to reach a consensus on whether US Steel's acquisition by Nippon Steel threatens Washington's national security, shifting the decision to the White House, the Japanese company said on Monday night.

The deadlock by the Committee on Foreign Investment in the United States (CFIUS) means the controversial US\$14.9 billion (RM66.8 billion) transaction will now be referred to President Joe Biden, who is legally required to act within a 15-day deadline.

"Nippon Steel has been informed by CFIUS that the Committee has referred this matter to President Biden after failing to reach a consensus on our transaction with US Steel," Nippon said.

Biden has criticised the deal for months, joining a loud consensus of American power players who have slammed the transaction, including President-elect Donald Trump and

incoming Vice-President JD Vance.

The deal became ensnared in the 2024 presidential campaign when Pennsylvania emerged as a critical swing state and leaders of the United Steelworkers (USW) union loudly opposed the transaction.

Nippon officials had hoped to have more success after the election, but there have been few signs of change in the dynamics.

US media have reported that the killing of the deal could prompt litigation from the steel companies.

There are also questions about diplomatic fallout from derailing a transaction championed by Japan, a close US ally.

Nippon said the deal should go through.

"During the 15-day period that the President has to make a final decision, we urge him to reflect on the great lengths that we have gone to address any national security concerns that have been raised and the significant commitments we have made to grow US Steel, protect American jobs, and strengthen the entire American steel industry, which will enhance American national security," Nippon said.

"We are confident that our transaction should and will be approved if it is fairly evaluated on its merits."

US Steel also called on Biden to approve the deal, noting that Nippon is based in "one of the United States' closest allies" and describing the transaction as a means to "combat the competitive threat from China."

The Nippon deal is "the best way, by far, to ensure that US Steel, including its employees, communities, and customers, will thrive well into the future," US Steel said.

Nippon has argued that the transaction would pump much-needed capital to update plants in Pennsylvania's Mon Valley, the oldest of which dates to 1875.

The company has described the transaction as a lifeline to Pennsylvania's much-diminished steel industry, vowing to keep US Steel's headquarters in Pittsburgh.

But the USW union has characterised Nippon's commitments as untrustworthy, while slamming US Steel executives as being motivated by the huge windfalls they would likely make from the sale.

"The proposed US Steel-Nippon transaction represents nothing more than corporate greed, selling out American workers and jeopardising the long-term future of the domestic steel industry and our national security," USW president David McCall said as he urged Biden to block the transaction. - AFP

Spanish govt extends energy windfall tax

MADRID: The Spanish government has issued a decree extending a temporary tax on energy companies into 2025, Prime Minister Pedro Sanchez said on Monday, after lawmakers voted last week to eliminate the levy.

The decree enters into force on Jan 1, but it will need to be confirmed by parliament within 30 days in order to apply throughout next year as the minority government intends - which may prove difficult to achieve as its partners to the left and right are at odds on the issue.

Sanchez said that with the extension, Madrid was upholding the commitments made to its partners, as it required an "extra effort" from energy companies while at the same time introducing a tax incentive which "takes into consideration strategic investments that are essential for decarbonisation".

The tax credits had been demanded by the centre-right Catalan separatist party Junts and Basque nationalists PNV, who argue that the levy impacted investments in their respective regions.

Utilities have warned that extending the levy of 1.2% for companies with a turnover of at least €1 billion (RM4.6 billion) would jeopardise €30 billion in renewable energy investments.

The temporary tax was introduced in 2022 to ease cost-of-living pressures for ordinary Spaniards as firms gained from a surge in energy prices following the war in Ukraine.

In its last meeting of the year, the cabinet also extended by six months the temporary subsidies that allow public transport prices to be offered at a discount, Sanchez said. - Reuters

ECB 'very close' to reaching inflation goal

LONDON: European Central Bank (ECB) President Christine Lagarde said the euro zone was getting "very close" to reaching the central bank's medium-term inflation goal, according to an interview published by the *Financial Times* on Monday.

Earlier in December, Lagarde had said the central bank would cut interest rates further if inflation continued to ease towards its 2% target, as curbing growth was no longer necessary.

"We're getting very close to that stage when we can declare that we have sustainably brought inflation to our medium-term 2%," Lagarde told the newspaper, urging continued vigilance on services inflation.

"You know, inflation, the latest reading we have is 2.2%," she added.

"But services is still 3.9% and not budging much. It's been hovering around 4%. Slightly declining now."

Lagarde said she opposed retaliation by Europe to tariff threats made by incoming US President Donald Trump.

"I said that retaliation was a bad approach because I think that overall trade restrictions followed by retaliation and this tit-for-tat, conflictual way of dealing with trade is just bad for the global economy at large," she added. - Reuters



The Nippon Steel logo is displayed at the company's headquarters in Tokyo. - REUTERS/SPIC

UK insurer Aviva to shed up to 2,300 jobs in takeover of Direct Line

LONDON: British insurer Aviva could cut up to 2,300 jobs as it takes over smaller rival Direct Line in a £3.7 billion (RM21 billion) cash-and-stock deal, the companies said on Monday, creating the UK's largest home and motor insurer.

The deal, which was first announced earlier this month, will see Direct Line shareholders receive 0.2867 new Aviva shares, 129.7 pence in cash and up to 5 pence in the form of a dividend, Aviva said.

The takeover represents Aviva CEO Amanda Blanc's biggest acquisition to date, as she tries to expand in the company's core markets of Britain, Canada and Ireland after selling a series of

overseas assets to simplify the business.

The combined company will shed between 5% and 7% of its total workforce as it eliminates overlapping roles, putting up to 2,300 jobs at risk, with the cuts spread over three years, the companies said.

Aviva had just over 23,000 employees at the end of 2023 while Direct Line had just over 10,000, according to the companies' annual reports.

Analysts said the terms of the deal were in line with expectations, and Aviva shares rose 0.5% on Monday following the announcement of the agreement.

"Christmas has come early for Direct Line

investors," Matt Britzman, senior equity analyst at Hargreaves Lansdown said in a note.

Aviva and Direct Line reached a preliminary agreement early this month.

Aviva had until Christmas Day to make a formal offer or walk away under UK takeover rules.

Aviva aims to save £125 million annually in pre-tax costs within three years after completion.

Realising the cost savings from the deal will result in one-off integration costs of approximately £250 million, the companies said.

The deal will also allow Aviva to increase its

dividend after completion, by a "mid single digit percentage," it said, but the company will no longer launch a share buyback next year while it completes the transaction.

Direct Line, under CEO Adam Winslow who joined the company from Aviva in March, has made efforts to energise a business hurt by an underperforming motor insurance arm.

The company missed expectations for half-year operating profit in September.

It has implemented aggressive price hikes to mitigate the rising costs of claims and announced plans in November to cut 550 roles, or about 5% of its global workforce. - Reuters

MARKET ROUND-UP: DECEMBER 24

BURSA MALAYSIA

Trade Statistic 24 Dec 2024



SUNBIZ presents a summary of the day's trading activity on Bursa Malaysia and other markets in an easy to digest format.

Sources: Bursa Malaysia, Bernama, shareinvestor.com and websites

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| Bursa Indices | | |
|----------------------------|-----------|---------------------------|
| INDEX | | CHANGE |
| FBMEMAS | 12,282.80 | +33.90 |
| FBMVKLCI | 1,602.99 | +6.79 |
| CONSUMER PRODUCTS | 539.27 | +1.26 |
| INDUSTRIAL PRODUCTS | 170.38 | +0.09 |
| CONSTRUCTION | 300.03 | -1.02 |
| FINANCIAL SERVICES | 18,883.70 | +25.44 |
| ENERGY | 815.06 | +11.84 |
| TELECOMMUNICATIONS | 534.85 | +2.51 |
| HEALTH CARE | 2,320.98 | -6.45 |
| TRANSPORTATION | 1,037.83 | -3.50 |
| PROPERTY | 1,083.44 | -3.55 |
| PLANTATION | 7,508.68 | +20.87 |
| FBMSHA | 12,237.60 | +24.54 |
| FBMACE | 5,281.56 | +34.29 |
| TECHNOLOGY | 64.10 | +0.08 |
| TURNOVER: 2.014 bil | | VALUE: RM1.542 bil |

FBM KLCI closes above key 1,600 level on selected buying

BURSA Malaysia maintained its positive momentum to finish higher yesterday and above the key psychological level of 1,600, supported by persistent buying in utilities and industrial blue chips, said an analyst.

At 5pm, the benchmark FBM KLCI rose 6.79 points or 0.43% to 1,602.99 compared with Monday's close of 1,596.20.

The market bellwether opened 0.44 of a point firmer at 1,596.64, its intraday low, and steadily moved to its intraday high of 1,603.89 in the late afternoon session.

The broader market turned positive towards the end of trading, with gainers outpacing decliners 500 to 428, while 533 counters were unchanged, 962 untraded, and nine suspended.

UOB Kay Hian Wealth Advisors' head of investment research Mohd Sedek Jantan said the FBM KLCI's gains were predominantly led by utilities and industrial stocks, with 24 of the index's constituents recording increases, while only two posted declines.

Among heavyweights, Maybank was flat at RM10.08, Public Bank gained three sen to RM4.55, CIMB rose two sen to RM7.97, Tenaga Nasional and YTL Power both put on eight sen to RM14.08 and RM4.19 respectively, and IHH Healthcare added five sen to RM7.08.

For active stocks, Winstar Capital rose 3.5 sen to 64 sen, Vanzo and JCY perked up 1.5 sen each to 18 sen and 52.5 sen respectively, LifeWater bagged seven sen to 93 sen, while Sarawak Cable lost one sen to 14 sen.

On the index board, the FBM Emas Index gamered 33.90 points to 12,282.88, the FBM Emas Shariah Index climbed 24.54 points to 12,237.66, and the FBMT 100 Index advanced 34.64 points to 11,969.35.

The FBM ACE Index increased 34.29 points to 5,281.56 but the FBM 70 Index shed 6.42 points to 18,375.27. - Bernama

| Top 20 Actives | | | | |
|----------------|--------------|----------|---------|--------------|
| STOCKS | CLOSING (RM) | +/- (RM) | +/- (%) | VOLUME ('00) |
| HSI-CWAM | 0.075 | - | - | 1,200,348 |
| HSI-PWBI | 0.125 | -0.025 | -16.67 | 783,684 |
| GENETEC | 1.300 | 0.060 | 4.84 | 416,152 |
| WINSTAR | 0.640 | 0.035 | 5.79 | 411,071 |
| HSI-CWAO | 0.040 | -0.005 | -11.11 | 329,767 |
| VANZO | 0.180 | 0.015 | 9.09 | 289,060 |
| SCABLE | 0.140 | -0.010 | -6.67 | 248,793 |
| JCY | 0.525 | 0.015 | 2.94 | 243,859 |
| HM-R1 | 0.015 | - | - | 239,170 |
| HSI-CY8 | 0.035 | -0.010 | -22.22 | 229,774 |
| GENETEC-CE | 0.090 | 0.010 | 12.50 | 211,080 |
| LWSABAH | 0.930 | 0.070 | 8.14 | 205,861 |
| TANCO | 1.910 | 0.030 | 1.60 | 203,422 |
| MYEG | 0.940 | -0.010 | -1.05 | 201,579 |
| HEXTAR | 0.890 | -0.005 | -0.56 | 174,249 |
| AIMFLEX | 0.150 | -0.005 | -3.23 | 173,818 |
| GAMUDA | 4.620 | 0.100 | 2.22 | 171,378 |
| DIALOG | 1.830 | 0.050 | 2.81 | 170,722 |
| GENM | 2.190 | 0.040 | 1.86 | 170,633 |
| TOPGLOV | 1.320 | -0.010 | -0.75 | 166,574 |



| Top 20 Gainers (By RM) | | | |
|------------------------|--------------|----------|--------------|
| STOCKS | CLOSING (RM) | +/- (RM) | VOLUME ('00) |
| KLK | 21.480 | 0.180 | 1,262 |
| PETDAG | 19.380 | 0.180 | 649 |
| YINSON | 2.700 | 0.130 | 23,196 |
| BKAWAN | 20.120 | 0.120 | 33 |
| ALLIANZ | 20.380 | 0.100 | 83 |
| PANAMY | 17.600 | 0.100 | 91 |
| CHINAETF-MYR | 4.830 | 0.100 | 285 |
| SEM | 2.000 | 0.090 | 524 |
| TM | 6.720 | 0.090 | 18,390 |
| UMCCA | 5.190 | 0.090 | 399 |
| PPB | 12.180 | 0.080 | 3,979 |
| TENAGA | 14.080 | 0.080 | 17,388 |
| YTLPOWER | 4.190 | 0.080 | 85,242 |
| BAT | 7.520 | 0.070 | 989 |
| DAYANG | 2.060 | 0.070 | 33,245 |
| LWSABAH | 0.930 | 0.070 | 205,861 |
| HSI-CWA7 | 0.565 | 0.065 | 290 |
| HSI-CWCJ | 0.675 | 0.065 | 300 |
| GENETEC | 1.300 | 0.060 | 416,152 |
| HSI-CY9 | 0.450 | 0.060 | 10,185 |

| Top 20 Gainers (By %) | | | |
|-----------------------|--------------|---------|--------------|
| STOCKS | CLOSING (RM) | +/- (%) | VOLUME ('00) |
| BCMALL | 0.015 | 200.00 | 18,709 |
| AXTERIA-WA | 0.010 | 100.00 | 432 |
| BAUTO-C40 | 0.010 | 100.00 | 4,050 |
| EAH | 0.010 | 100.00 | 23,901 |
| KGROU | 0.010 | 100.00 | 978 |
| PERMAJU-PA | 0.010 | 100.00 | 1,700 |
| WEGMANS-WC | 0.010 | 100.00 | 107 |
| NOVAMSC-PA | 0.065 | 62.50 | 16,130 |
| HONGSENG | 0.015 | 50.00 | 22,625 |
| INARI-C2N | 0.015 | 50.00 | 150 |
| PARLO-WA | 0.015 | 50.00 | 26 |
| DRBHCOCM3J | 0.035 | 40.00 | 2,950 |
| HSI-HZN | 0.030 | 40.00 | 35 |
| ENRA-WA | 0.110 | 37.50 | 10 |
| DSOIC-C65 | 0.020 | 33.33 | 2,500 |
| FBMVKLCI-CQ0 | 0.020 | 33.33 | 1,450 |
| GENETEC-CD | 0.020 | 33.33 | 1,879 |
| JCY-C15 | 0.020 | 33.33 | 2,000 |
| LIONIND-WA | 0.020 | 33.33 | 10,120 |
| MTRONIC | 0.020 | 33.33 | 254 |

| World Stocks/Commodities | | | |
|-----------------------------------|-----------|--------------|------------------|
| INDEX | CLOSING | DAILY CHANGE | DAILY CHANGE (%) |
| DJIA (US) | 42,906.95 | +66.69 | +0.16 |
| S&P 500 (US) | 5,974.07 | +43.22 | +0.73 |
| NASDAQ (US) | 19,764.89 | +192.29 | +0.98 |
| NYSE (US) | 19,207.11 | +87.67 | +0.46 |
| EURO STOXX 50 (EUR) | 4,863.28 | +10.35 | +0.21 |
| FTSE 100 (UK) | 8,128.43 | +25.71 | +0.32 |
| DAX (GER) | 19,848.77 | -35.98 | -0.18 |
| NIKKEI 225 (JPN) | 39,036.85 | -124.49 | -0.32 |
| TOPIX (JPN) | 2,727.26 | +0.52 | +0.02 |
| HANG SENG INDEX (HK) | 20,098.29 | +215.16 | +1.08 |
| CSI 300 (CHN) | 3,983.69 | +50.12 | +1.27 |
| SH SE COM (CHN) | 3,393.53 | +42.27 | +1.26 |
| KOSPI INDEX (SK) | 2,440.52 | -1.49 | -0.06 |
| MSCI ASIA PACIFIC | 181.08 | +1.86 | +1.04 |
| ASX 200 (AUS) | 8,220.90 | +19.32 | +0.24 |
| ALL ORDINARIES INDX (AUS) | 8,471.50 | +18.81 | +0.22 |
| SENSEX INDEX (IND) | 78,552.31 | +12.14 | +0.02 |
| FBM KLCI | 1,603.89 | +7.69 | +0.48 |
| STRAITS TIMES INDEX (S'PORE) | 3,769.55 | +17.22 | +0.46 |
| WTI (US\$/BBL.) | 69.72 | +0.48 | +0.69 |
| BRENT (US\$/BBL.) | 73.1 | +0.47 | +0.65 |
| GOLD (COMEX) (US\$/T OZ) | 2,632.10 | +3.90 | +0.15 |
| SILVER (COMEX) (US\$/T OZ) | 30.27 | +0.08 | +0.25 |
| PLATINUM (US\$/T OZ) | 941.44 | -0.36 | -0.04 |
| COPPER (COMEX) (US CENTS/LB.) | 411.55 | +3.05 | +0.75 |
| COPPER 3MO (LME) (US\$/MT) | 8,912.00 | -29.00 | -0.32 |
| CORN (US CENTS/BU.) | 447.75 | 0.00 | 0.00 |
| WHEAT (US CENTS/BU.) | 537.75 | -2.75 | -0.51 |
| SOYBEAN OIL (CBOT) (US CENTS/LB.) | 40.52 | -0.14 | -0.34 |
| COCOA (ICE) (US\$/MT) | 11,746.00 | -208.00 | -1.74 |
| RUBBER (S'PORE) (US CENTS/KG) | 194.30 | +2.80 | +1.46 |

As at 5pm, Dec 24

| Top 20 Losers (By RM) | | | |
|-----------------------|--------------|----------|--------------|
| STOCKS | CLOSING (RM) | +/- (RM) | VOLUME ('00) |
| HEIM | 23.660 | -0.280 | 181 |
| MPI | 25.480 | -0.260 | 256 |
| HSI-PWDI | 0.225 | -0.220 | 511 |
| UTDPLT | 30.000 | -0.220 | 3,577 |
| TAKAFUL | 3.910 | -0.190 | 10,960 |
| HLBANK | 20.200 | -0.140 | 977 |
| MBMR | 5.870 | -0.140 | 9,645 |
| HSI-CWA1 | 0.280 | -0.110 | 15,330 |
| MCEMENT | 4.940 | -0.110 | 12,731 |
| PIE | 5.980 | -0.100 | 4,855 |
| PLB | 1.030 | -0.100 | 2,830 |
| AJI | 15.220 | -0.080 | 149 |
| BURSA | 8.690 | -0.070 | 6,421 |
| ECOWLD | 1.970 | -0.070 | 33,487 |
| HSI-PWBX | 0.765 | -0.070 | 3,430 |
| HSI-PWDK | 0.410 | -0.070 | 7,014 |
| KOSSAN | 2.640 | -0.070 | 31,755 |
| KOTRA | 4.420 | -0.070 | 40 |
| SAM | 4.400 | -0.070 | 3,530 |
| SUNCON | 4.610 | -0.070 | 7,639 |

| Top 20 Losers (By %) | | | |
|----------------------|--------------|---------|--------------|
| STOCKS | CLOSING (RM) | +/- (%) | VOLUME ('00) |
| HSI-CYK | 0.005 | -75.00 | 6,000 |
| MI-C22 | 0.005 | -75.00 | 3,704 |
| HSI-PWBA | 0.020 | -69.23 | 40,495 |
| E&O-C17 | 0.010 | -60.00 | 24,000 |
| HSI-CWAU | 0.025 | -54.55 | 490 |
| CTOS-C12 | 0.005 | -50.00 | 10,000 |
| HSI-CYQ | 0.040 | -50.00 | 600 |
| HSI-HZA | 0.005 | -50.00 | 2,250 |
| MBSB-C72 | 0.005 | -50.00 | 1 |
| HSI-PWDI | 0.225 | -49.44 | 511 |
| RHBANKC58 | 0.050 | -47.37 | 110 |
| TOPGLOV-C4K | 0.015 | -40.00 | 9,700 |
| TROP-CL | 0.030 | -40.00 | 8 |
| HSI-PWDH | 0.045 | -35.71 | 10 |
| ARMADA-C91 | 0.030 | -33.33 | 500 |
| HSI-PWDH | 0.090 | -33.33 | 8,080 |
| SIMEPROP-C35 | 0.010 | -33.33 | 12,250 |
| YB-WA | 0.010 | -33.33 | 6,732 |
| TAKAFUL-CZ | 0.085 | -29.17 | 1,973 |
| HSI-CWA1 | 0.280 | -28.21 | 15,330 |

MARKETS/FROM THE BROKERS

SUNBIZ presents extracts of a selection of commentaries and research reports received from stockbrokers on counters that could be of interest to investors.

Compiled by SunBiz Team

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MARC reaffirms Malaysia's AAA rating with stable outlook

KUALA LUMPUR: MARC Ratings Bhd has reaffirmed Malaysia's sovereign credit rating at AAA with a stable outlook, reflecting the country's strong economic fundamentals.

Key strengths include a diversified economy, robust GDP growth, effective monetary policies, and a resilient financial sector.

The rating agency said 2024 GDP growth had surpassed expectations, bolstered by rising foreign investments and solid consumer spending, with similar trends anticipated in 2025.

Malaysia's external financial position remains strong, marked by consistent current account surpluses, substantial international reserves, and a stable exchange rate.

MARC Ratings said Malaysia's financial sector continues to demonstrate resilience, with impaired loans at just 1.6% of total loans in the first half of 2024 and a solid total capital ratio of 18.5%, well above the Basel III minimum of 10.5%.

However, fiscal challenges persist. Malaysia's fiscal deficit and public debt remain elevated. In 2024, debt was 64% of GDP, higher than the peer median of 55%.

Though recovered to 12.6% in 2023, the tax revenue-to-GDP ratio lags behind the peer median of 18.9%. Nonetheless, fiscal consolidation efforts are expected to reduce the deficit to 4.3% of GDP in 2024 and 3.8% in 2025.

MARC Ratings said the stable outlook hinges on sustained economic growth, fiscal reforms, and political stability.

Key priorities include improving fiscal metrics, reducing subsidies, and boosting tax revenue.

Failure to achieve fiscal goals or economic targets could weaken the credit profile, while successful reforms would strengthen Malaysia's economic resilience over the medium term, it said.

Ringgit rises against dollar, buoyed by higher oil prices

THE ringgit maintained its upward trajectory to close higher against the US dollar and major currencies yesterday, mainly lifted by rising oil prices.

At 6pm, the ringgit was trading at 4.4845/4900 against the greenback, up from Monday's close of 4.4870/4925.

UOB Kay Hian Wealth Advisors head of investment research Mohd Sedek Jantan said the ringgit's performance was partly driven by a recovery in Brent crude oil prices, which have risen above US\$73 per barrel at the time of writing.

He said the oil market's uptrend was driven by concerns over a potential supply glut and declining demand in the coming year.

Additionally, strong performance in the domestic equity market, driven by year-end portfolio adjustments, helped boost demand for the ringgit, he said.

However, he anticipated demand for the ringgit to soften during this quiet trading week, as many traders are in a holiday mood with Christmas celebrations and the New Year approaching.

Overall, the ringgit strengthened against several major currencies.

It appreciated against the Japanese yen to 2.8547/8586 from Monday's close of 2.8636/8673, rose versus the British pound to 5.6209/6278 from 5.6384/6453.

The local note showed mixed performance compared to Asean currencies.

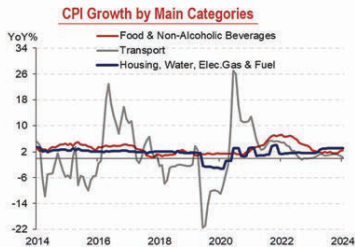
It gained against the Singapore dollar, trading at 3.2979/3024 compared with 3.3095/3138 previously and was slightly higher against the Philippine peso at 7.66/7.68 from 7.67/7.68.

It was flat versus the Indonesian rupiah at 276.9/277.4 from 276.9/277.5. - Bernama

| Exchange Rates | | | |
|-----------------------|---------------|-----------|-----------|
| FOREIGN CURRENCY | SELLING TT/OD | BUYING TT | BUYING OD |
| 1 US Dollar | 4.5610 | 4.4200 | 4.4100 |
| 1 Australian Dollar | 2.8640 | 2.7430 | 2.7270 |
| 1 Brunei Dollar | 3.3600 | 3.2560 | 3.2480 |
| 1 Canadian Dollar | 3.1680 | 3.0790 | 3.0670 |
| 1 Euro | 4.7500 | 4.5890 | 4.5690 |
| 1 New Zealand Dollar | 2.5840 | 2.4840 | 2.4680 |
| 1 Singapore Dollar | 3.3600 | 3.2560 | 3.2480 |
| 1 Sterling Pound | 5.7230 | 5.5320 | 5.5120 |
| 1 Swiss Franc | 5.1100 | 4.8840 | 4.8690 |
| 100 UAE Dirham | 125.6500 | 118.9600 | 118.7600 |
| 100 Bangladesh Taka | 3.8970 | 3.6230 | 3.4230 |
| 100 Chinese Renminbi | 62.9200 | 60.1800 | N/A |
| 100 Danish Krone | 65.2600 | 59.9700 | 59.7700 |
| 100 Hongkong Dollar | 59.3300 | 56.3000 | 56.1000 |
| 100 Indian Rupee | 5.4500 | 5.1100 | 4.9100 |
| 100 Indonesian Rupiah | 0.0292 | 0.0264 | 0.0214 |
| 100 Japanese Yen | 2.9040 | 2.8060 | 2.7960 |
| 100 New Taiwan Dollar | N/A | N/A | N/A |
| 100 Norwegian Krone | 41.2000 | 37.8200 | 37.6200 |
| 100 Pakistan Rupee | 1.6700 | 1.5600 | 1.3600 |
| 100 Philippine Peso | 7.9100 | 7.4400 | 7.2400 |
| 100 Qatar Riyal | 126.4200 | 120.0200 | 119.8200 |
| 100 Saudi Riyal | 122.6800 | 116.4600 | 116.2600 |
| 100 South Africa Rand | 25.5000 | 23.0100 | 22.8100 |
| 100 Sri Lanka Rupee | 1.5800 | 1.4500 | 1.2500 |
| 100 Swedish Krona | 42.5900 | 38.7100 | 38.5100 |
| 100 Thai Baht | 13.9000 | 12.3000 | 11.9000 |

Source: Malayan Banking Bhd/Bernama

Malaysia Consumer Price Index Deflation in November, first since July 2021



Source: Kenanga Research, Macrobond

HEADLINE inflation edged down to 1.8% YoY in November (Oct: 1.9%), matching September's level and falling below both our projection (2%) and market consensus (2.1%).

The softer inflation reading reflects subdued MoM changes across subcomponents, with food inflation remained muted, transport costs fell sharply, and communication expenses continued to decline. These were partially offset by rising housing and miscellaneous costs. Inflation declined by -0.1% MoM (Oct: 0.2%), marking its first drop in 40 months.

Core inflation held steady at 1.8% YoY for the third straight month, with no change on a monthly basis. Rising core housing costs were offset by declining core transport prices.

Subdued food prices and sharper transport declines drive deflation; marginally offset by rising housing costs.

Food & non-alcoholic beverages (2.6%; Oct: 2.3%): while higher YoY, food prices were muted on a monthly basis as a marginal decline in meat, fish, fruits and vegetables costs, offset higher milk and oil-based products prices.

Transport (0.4%; Oct: 0.7%): eased for the third straight month, hitting an 11-month low, driven by slower maintenance cost growth for personal vehicles (4.6%; Oct: 4.8%) and a sharp drop in domestic airfares (-19.7%; Oct: 0.8%).

Housing (3.2%; Oct: 3.1%): rose to a four month high, mainly due to a 0.4% MoM (Oct: 0.0%) increase in rental cost.

Domestic factors could push headline inflation to 2.7% in 2025, though external risks loom. - Kenanga Research, Dec 24

Mynews Holdings Bhd Buy. Target price: RM0.81



Source: RHB Research, Bloomberg

MANAGEMENT is focused on driving growth through expansion in FY25 targeting 80-100 new outlets nationwide (60% Mynews, 40% CU). Meanwhile, the first Maru Coffee outlet, which opened in Q4'24 is performing well, and it plans to open 20 more outlets in FY25F. GPM expansion (+2.6ppts to 37.6% in FY24) is expected to be sustainable following the consolidation of Mynews and CU management teams, which has enhanced bargaining power with suppliers, alongside effective wastage control. With increased volume from the outlet expansion, we forecast GPM to reach 38% in FY25.

Mynews and CU in-store sales both improved (FY24 sales +10.1% YoY) driven by the fine-tuning of product offering and introduction of higher-quality fresh food items, which improved consumer traction. The company has steadily gained market share, increasing to 9-10% from 8% at the start of 2024 while CU is approaching a breakeven point as management focuses on optimising its product mix and reducing wastage. It also plans to launch the CU app in Jan 2025 and integrate it with the Mynews app to further enhance customer engagement.

We expect FPC's turnaround to sustain, driven by higher volume from outlet expansion. Management indicated that FPC's production has increased despite lower wastage, thanks to its meticulous inventory management and the selection of optimal store keeping units (SKUs). Meanwhile, WHSmith delivered its strongest performance in Q4'24, and we anticipate continued improvement, supported by the rebound in tourist arrivals.

Key risks: Delays in CU's turnaround, weaker-than-expected consumer sentiment, and higher-than-expected operating costs. BUY with RM0.81 TP. - RHB Research, Dec 24

Top Glove Corp Bhd Market Perform. Target price: RM1.30



Source: Kenanga Research

TOPGLOV'S Q1'25 met expectations. It registered a small core net profit of RM4.6 million or 3% of ours and consensus full-year net profit forecasts. We keep our FY25 and FY26 earnings unchanged in anticipation of stronger earnings in the remaining quarters of FY25 underpinned by pent-up demand.

QoQ: Q1'25 revenue rose 6% due to a higher sales volume (+16%) which more than offset lower ASP (-2%). However, EBITDA surged >100%, thanks to: (i) an absence of high-cost inventory (which weighed on its performance then), and (ii) higher revenue leading to better-than-expected economies of scale. As a result, it returned to the black with a core profit of RM4.6 million (excluding RM0.9 million gain from PPE) in Q1'25 compared to a loss of RM43 million in Q4'24. YoY, its Q1'25 revenue rose 80% largely due to a higher sales volume (+103%) which more than offset lower ASP (-2%). At the net level, its Q1'25 posted a core net profit of RM4.6 million compared to a loss of RM58 million in Q1'24 due to the absence of high-cost inventory (which weighed on its performance then). No dividend was declared this quarter as expected.

TOPGLOV expects to benefit from the recently announced US tariffs on Chinese glove makers. It has seen more enquiries from its US customers. The group highlighted that its exports to the US are continuing to show improvement which rose 21% QoQ in Q1'25. US sales accounted for 18% of total group volume sales, above the 15% mix for FY24, but still below the pre-pandemic average of 20-30%.

MARKET PERFORM with RM1.30 TP. - Kenanga Research, Dec 24



the Sun **LYFE**

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Technology and social media

TUESDAY
Travel and leisure

WEDNESDAY
Fashion and beauty

THURSDAY
Home and living

FRIDAY
Food and beverage

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BY JOHN TAN

Capturing spirit of Christmas

➤ Immerse yourself in seasonal cheer with festive mall decorations

FESTIVE decorations are among the many highlights of Christmas. Each year, shopping malls are decked in lively decorations, celebrating the festive spirit.

This year, shopping malls outside the Klang Valley have transformed into enchanting wonderlands, displaying mystical and fun elements to spread festive joy.

Mitsui Outlet Park KLIA Sepang

Following the theme of Fantasy Christmas Circus, Mitsui Outlet Park KLIA Sepang has blended the festive spirit with the excitement of a circus.

The mall features winter-themed decorations, along with circus-like displays to welcome shoppers to embrace the holiday magic. The highlight is Sunshine Square, where an enchanting circus and magical tree are decorated with shimmering ornaments.

For further festive cheer, there will be a magical Holiday Circus Parade on today at 5pm. Additionally, there will be exclusive sales and promotions in conjunction with the year-end celebrations.

Shoppers can look to purchase items at a discounted price and redeem a limited edition gift by spending RM1,500 in two receipts, available for the first 50 customers of the day.

Upon their purchase, shoppers can wrap their gifts for free as complimentary gift-wrapping services are available today.

This will be for shoppers who spend RM200 or more in a single transaction. Shoppers further qualify for two hours of free parking until Mar 31 next year.

Resorts World Genting

Shoppers can experience a winter Christmas at Resorts World Genting. This season, it has transformed into a Christmas Wonderland, offering shoppers a unique winter experience.

With free admission, shoppers can step into a magical winter at the Kimhua Atrium section. Shoppers can witness the northern lights shimmering across the sky and enjoy a well-lit Christmas tree and an immersive gallery.

The gallery is filled with holiday-themed art pieces and figures adorned in festive attire alongside a beautifully decorated walkway.



Mitsui Outlet Park KLIA Sepang presents Christmas with a circus touch.

Christmas winter further comes alive at Liberty Lane. Shoppers can experience "winter" as there will be displays of snowfall. Until New Year, shoppers will get to immerse themselves in snow from Sunday to Thursday, 7.30pm to 10.30pm, once every hour. Other festive offerings include Christmas performances, Santa & Mrs Claus meet-and-greets and festive discounts.

IOI City Mall

Sleigh away at IOI City Mall as the mall has been remodelled into an enchanting Christmas wonderland.

The lower ground floor has been decorated with festive figurines such as reindeer, butterflies, flowers and a towering Christmas tree. Aside from decorations, IOI City Mall is organising festive activities for shoppers to enjoy.

Until New Year, shoppers will enjoy Christmas performances and family-friendly activities. Jolly dances, festive jingles and walkabouts with Santa are scheduled to occur.



KLIA taps into Alice in Wonderland for its festive theme.

There will also be workshops for kids, with holiday-themed projects such as chocolate-making, gingerbread decorating and Santa hat crafting.

A series of redemptions are set aside for the festive too. With minimum spending of RM300 in a single receipt at the mall, shoppers can redeem Christmas gifts such as collectable Nanoblocks, music boxes and Donna Chang perfume sets.

Additionally, IOI City Mall will be organising a celebration to usher in 2025. Shoppers are invited to join the New Year's Eve celebration at Symphony East on Dec 31, welcoming the new year through an array of fun activities.

KL International Airport

KL International Airport (KLIA) is living out its Alice in Wonderland fantasy, transforming into a whimsical wonderland with its Alice's Adventures: A Magical Christmas celebration.

The gigantic tea-cup ride, rabbit hole kaleidoscope and the Queen's Rose Tunnel are among the festive highlights to look out for. The mystical celebration is not confined to KLIA alone.

Travellers and guests can immerse themselves in this magical transformation at all international airports, including Penang International Airport, Kota Kinabalu International Airport and Langkawi International Airport.

For further festive cheer, Malaysia Airports Holdings Bhd is offering year-end promotions for travellers at its international airports. With a minimum spending of RM500 in a maximum of two combined receipts at KLIA terminals 1 and 2, travellers can redeem exclusive Christmas gifts.

But with a minimum spending of RM20 in a single receipt at KLIA terminals 1 and 2, travellers can enjoy a spin at the gigantic tea-cup ride.

Travellers who spend RM200 in a maximum of two receipts at any international airport, will stand a chance to win RM1 million in shopping vouchers, along with other prizes.



Resorts World Genting transforms into an enchanting festive wonderland.



IOI City Mall has family-friendly activities.

LYFE'S LOOKBOOK

Post-Christmas must-haves

► Inspo for casual but festive looks

BY VERONICA ELANKOVAN

CHRISTMAS is a day event but the spirit of Noel sleighs through the entire week leading up to New Year's Day. This includes after-Christmas brunch, friends catch-up and maybe, a family road trip, which all require outfits for the Yuletide celebrations. So, if you are looking for some inspiration – fret not, *theSun* has got you covered.

Short flutter sleeves for a breezy holiday trip. – PICS BY H&M



Nothing screams Christmas more than a red dress. A plain red dress with fun sleeves such as the bishop sleeves or short flutter sleeves like these beauts (RM158) from H&M is just the frock you need for an after-Christmas brunch.

Bishop sleeves are a statement itself.



Uniqlo x JW Anderson 2025 Spring/Summer Collection.



Sometimes, you just have to keep it understated. Another gender-less option from Uniqlo x JW Anderson's collection is its preppy polo shirts (RM99–RM149). Style them with jeans or dress shorts and crew socks as well as your best pair of trainers.

Nothing better than a snugly fit.



Cosy and ready for brunch. – PICS BY MARKSAND SPENCER



Christmas jumpers (not the over-the-top ones) from Marks and Spencer (RM200–RM300) are a cosy way to embrace the festive spirit elegantly. The best part? It is unisex. All you have to do is pair it with straight-leg jeans or trousers.

Preppy is making a comeback in 2025.



Another unisex option, you cannot go wrong with an Oxford shirt from Uniqlo's x JW Anderson 2025 Spring/Summer Collection (RM129–RM149). Match them with jeans or black/beige trousers for that timeless preppy vibe.



Effortless chic, just the dress for a quiet Christmas dinner date. – ZARAPIC

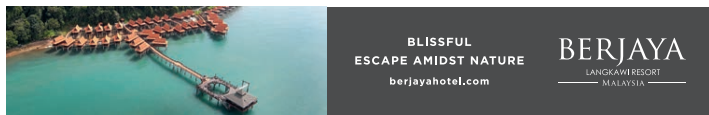
A slip dress is for the babes who do not want to try as hard but still want to look classy. A satin silk dress from Zara (RM129) paired with some minimalist jewellery is for the ones who want to be effortlessly chic.



Get *theSun*'s pick at Camper in TRX Exchange. – VERONICA ELANKOVAN/THE SUN

Any fit would not be complete without footwear. *theSun*'s pick from Camper is a staple – these Kiara boots (RM965) are the cherry on top for any ensemble. For men, any selection from Camper's Peu Icon Men (from RM900) will tie in your post-Christmas look. Rule of thumb: Comfortable and basic.

With these staples in your wardrobe, the festive week is just another runaway for you. So, dress up and have fun along the way. Happy holidays!



MALAYSIA's retail landscape continues to evolve with the launch of several notable outlets, each offering unique experiences and exclusive opportunities for consumers. These new openings cater to a wide range of interests, from tech enthusiasts and fashion lovers to families and avid Lego builders.

Retail buzz

U Mobile at IOI City Mall, Putrajaya
U Mobile's new retail store at IOI City Mall, Putrajaya, marks a progress in the telco's efforts to bring its services closer to customers in one of Malaysia's most vibrant locations. Designed to offer an engaging experience, the outlet provides a comprehensive range of products and services to meet the needs of both new and existing subscribers. Adding to the excitement, until Dec 31, customers signing up for select postpaid plans at the new store can enjoy a rebate of up to RM180, limited to the first 200 sign-ups. This initiative sees U Mobile rewarding its subscribers while enhancing convenience and accessibility, in line with its vision of transforming the customer experience.

➤ Exciting new experiences await shoppers



U Mobile opens its latest retail outlet at IOI City Mall, Putrajaya.

Skechers at Mid Valley Megamall
Skechers has reopened its newly renovated outlet at Mid Valley Megamall, offering a spacious and modern shopping environment that reflects the brand's dedication to style and comfort. Spanning 3,948 square feet, the revamped outlet provides an enhanced shopping experience with sleek interiors, improved layout and expanded sections for men, women and children. Customers can now explore a wider selection of Skechers's signature footwear and apparel, ranging from performance-driven collections to stylish everyday wear. Designed to cater to diverse needs, the outlet invites visitors to enjoy an enjoyable shopping journey while experiencing the latest trends and innovations from Skechers.



Golden Concept Pavilion, Kuala Lumpur

Swedish luxury lifestyle brand Golden Concept has made its debut in Malaysia, bringing premium Apple Watch and iPhone cases to Pavilion Kuala Lumpur. Renowned for its craftsmanship and opulence, the brand offers a stunning range of designs, including gold-plated finishes and options enhanced with leather or carbon fibre. Additionally, the boutique features the exclusive Mansory collaboration, limited to just 200 pieces, priced at RM13,000 each. Golden Concept's Malaysian launch aligns with its global expansion strategy, offering personalised luxury experiences and eco-conscious innovations.



Golden Concept debuts in Malaysia with its flagship boutique at Pavilion KL.

Oh!Some at Berjaya Times Square
Earlier this month, trendy global retail brand Oh!Some opened its newest store at Berjaya Times Square, Kuala Lumpur, offering over 10,000 curated products from around the world. Renowned as a "Global Purchase" destination, Oh!Some features an impressive selection of beauty and skincare products from China, Japan and Korea, an array of global snacks and beverages, Japanese stationery and popular Southeast Asian brands. Adding to its appeal, the store has a long-term

partnership with Disney, showcasing exclusive merchandise featuring beloved characters such as Stitch, Donald Duck and Pixar collections. With open-shelf trials for beauty and skincare products, Oh!Some ensures a personalised shopping experience where customers can confidently try before they buy.

Lego Certified Store, Aeon Malacca
Malacca's rich cultural heritage now sees a vibrant blend of tradition and play with the opening of its first Lego Certified Store at Aeon Bandaraya Melaka. The 1,302 sq ft outlet showcases innovative features that celebrate the city's Baba Nyonya heritage, including a first-of-its-kind 3D model of a Nyonya lady intricately crafted by Lego model specialist Alen Zhang, alongside a Graphic Pillar depicting iconic landmarks like the Stadthuys and the Baba Nyonya Heritage Museum. Visitors can take part in interactive



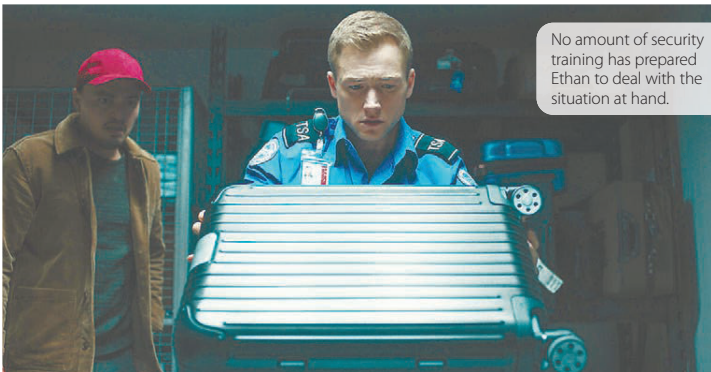
Lego Certified Store at Aeon Bandaraya Melaka.



Skechers reopens its newly renovated and expanded outlet at Mid Valley Megamall.

experiences such as the Pick and Build Wall, Play Table and Build a Minifigure station, where they can create personalised Lego minifigures.

These new outlets highlight the dynamism of Malaysia's retail industry, offering something distinctive for consumers and enriching your shopping adventures.



No amount of security training has prepared Ethan to deal with the situation at hand.



Bateman's Traveller uses any means necessary to complete his goal.

Carry-On aims to be new seasonal fave

BY MARK MATHEN VICTOR

AFTER receiving the good news on Christmas Eve that his girlfriend Nora Parisi (Sofia Carson) is pregnant, Ethan Koepke (Taron Egerton) begins to feel the pressure of becoming a father while holding a stagnating position as a Transportation Security Administration (TSA) officer at the Los Angeles International Airport (LAX).

Interpreting Nora's encouragement for him to retry entering the police academy the wrong way, Ethan convinces his supervisor to transfer him upwards from the metal detector scanning lane to the baggage-scanning lane, which is the premise of *Carry-On*.

This throws a wrench into an unnamed traveller's (Jason Bateman) plans, as he and his cohorts are forced to change their plan to get Ethan to allow a dangerous carry-on baggage to pass inspection and onto a plane.

The best description for the film is that it is very much a *Die Hard* film, at least in spirit, so much so that it is even better than *Die Hard 2*, which also involved a regular guy going against a group of terrorists in an airport on Christmas Eve.

However, what *Carry-On* does better is that it leans heavily towards the thriller elements rather than be an all-out action spectacle. Instead of propping up Egerton's Ethan as an action hero, *Carry-On* leverages on the cat-and-mouse dynamic that is commonplace in similar thrillers.

It pits Ethan's intelligence against Bateman's "Traveller" as one attempts to outsmart and foil the other's plans, while the other attempts to do the same but to accomplish their nefarious goal.

Both actors also find room to flex their acting chops, which goes against type. Bateman's early career involved comedy, while Egerton made

➤ Airport security officer faces terrorist plot in Netflix thriller



Cast:
Taron Egerton, Jason Bateman, Sofia Carson

Director:
Jaume Collet-Serra

E-VALUE
10

ACTING
9

PLOT
5

Though not playing a dashing British spy this time, Egerton continues to shine as an actor. — ALL PICS BY NETFLIX

his film debut in the action-fuelled *Kingsman: The Secret Service* a decade ago.

Carry-On is also director Jaume Collet-Serra falling back on the styling of his older films involving suspense. After directing Dwayne "The Rock" Johnson's atrocious ego vehicle

Black Adam two years ago, *Carry-On* is a return to form.

Those who enjoyed Collet-Serra's *Orphan* and the five identical Liam Neeson action-thrillers he pumped out through the 2010s will enjoy what he offers in *Carry-On*, which is a far

superior, smarter and more taut entry in his body of work. This is most certainly falling into the same "Christmas Movies List" as the first *Die Hard* and its sequel. It is just as enjoyable, if not more so.

Carry-On is streaming on Netflix.

Running Man cast returns to Malaysia

POPULAR Korean variety show *Running Man* is bringing six of its cast members Jee Seok-jin, Yoo Jae-seok, Kim Jong-kook, Haha, Song Ji-hyo and Yang Se-chan to Malaysia for a live event *Running Man: Run 2 U* on Feb 15, 2025 at the Mines International Exhibition and Convention Centre.

Running Man debuted in 2010 and has captivated global audiences with its unique blend of humour, creativity and adventure. Now celebrating 14 years of success, the show has aired 732 episodes, making it the longest-running variety programme in South Korea.

For Malaysian fans, the event's highlight is the debut appearance of Yoo and Yang. Yoo, renowned for his sharp wit, humour and humility, is a household name in South Korea, while Yang's humorous yet passionate style has endeared him to viewers. Their participation, alongside the rest of the cast, promises unforgettable moments and close interactions with fans, making this event a truly special occasion.

Running Man is one of South Korea's most iconic variety shows. Over 14 years, it has gained acclaim for its innovative challenges and games, ranging

from high-energy races through South Korean streets to thrilling adventures across the globe. The show has become a cultural phenomenon, inspiring fans worldwide to replicate its games.

The programme has earned numerous accolades, including the Netizens' Favourite Programme Award at the SBS Entertainment Awards, the Most Popular TV Programme Award by *Business Insider*, and the top Korean variety show ranking on platforms like iQiyi Taiwan. It has also received the Korean Brand Customer Loyalty Award for three consecutive years and the Brand of the Year Award. The cast's teamwork has been repeatedly recognised, with multiple group and individual honours at the SBS Entertainment Awards.

Malaysia holds a special place in the hearts of the *Running Man* team. The previous fan meeting in 2017 drew massive crowds and created cherished memories. This time, with the full cast reuniting in Kuala Lumpur, fans can look forward to even more spectacular performances, games and surprises.

Tickets for the event, priced from RM288 to RM958, will be on sale tomorrow. The event is organised by Sunstrong Entertainment.



Running Man cast will meet Malaysian fans on Feb 15, 2025 after a seven-year hiatus since its last visit to the country.

FUNK and acid jazz group The Brand New Heavies will bring its iconic *Brother Sister* 30 Tour to Kuala Lumpur next year for the 30th anniversary of the band's groundbreaking third album. The highly anticipated concert is set to take place on Feb 11 at Zepp Kuala Lumpur.

Released in 1994, the band's entire trajectory changed with *Brother Sister*. Propelled by the classic singles *Dream On Dreamer*, *Midnight At The Oasis* and *Back To Love*, the record achieved big milestones such as securing the fourth spot on the UK charts, over one million sales and a nomination at the BRIT Awards in 1995.

Featuring original members Andrew Levy and Simon Bartholomew, along with vocalist Angela Ricci, The Brand New Heavies will perform the album in full alongside other hits and fan favourites from their storied history with a complete extended live band.

"We can't believe that *Brother Sister* is going to be 30 years young. What better way to celebrate than coming to see us play the album in its entirety as well as all our hits," the band said in a statement.

Following its 1990 debut, The Brand New Heavies translated its love of sophisticated 70s funk grooves into an ever-evolving sound. After *Brother Sister*, the band followed it up with *Shelter*, a platinum-certified album that featured hits such as *Sometimes, You Are The Universe* and their take on Carole King's *You've Got A Friend*.

The legacy then continued to grow with consistently strong albums ever since, including 2019's *TBNH*, which featured the band's first recordings with Angela Ricci.

A year ago, The Brand New Heavies entered a new era of rediscovery with the release of its compilation album *Never Stop... The Best Of*. The band also embarked on the sold-out *Never Stop... The Greatest Hits Tour*, for which it was accompanied by the London Concert Orchestra.

Tickets for the concert start from RM384.

Acid jazz icon hits KL

➤ Brand New Heavies to mark 30 years of legendary album *Brother Sister* with tour



The Brand New Heavies can be considered as one of the pioneers of acid jazz.

Hai Lai A Mu set to bring soulful sound to Malaysia on March 1

CHINESE singer-songwriter Hai Lai A Mu is set to perform in Malaysia on March 1, 2025 at the Arena of Stars, Resorts World Genting, which will be his first concert outside China.

Hai Lai A Mu's world tour has already taken him to over 10 cities across China, where his emotionally charged performances, captivating setlists and breathtaking stage designs have earned him fan support. Now, Malaysia marks the first international stop on his tour, a milestone that promises to elevate his career to new heights.

The concert is divided into three sections – *Drifting*, *Tides and Opposite Shore* – each infused with heartfelt emotion and dynamic energy, guiding the audience on a journey of connection and healing.

Since his debut in 2018, Hai Lai A Mu has captured hearts with hit songs like *Fifty Years Later*, *It's Better to Meet and Farewell to My Close Friend*, among many others. His iconic track *Xilou Ernu* has surpassed 8.7 billion streams, while *A Guo Ji Qu* has become a beloved folk anthem. His music continues to break new ground, resonating with fans across major music platforms and spreading positive, uplifting messages.

From his early recognition on *Chinese Idol* in 2013 to the viral success of his songs *The Person Who Demands Songs* and *Your Myriad of*



Catch this musical experience on March 1 at the Arena of Stars.

Rivers and Thousands of Hills in 2020, his journey has been marked by perseverance and a deep connection with his fans. In 2021, he launched his first national concert tour and in 2024, he made his debut at the CCTV Spring Festival Gala. Later that year, he joined the star-studded *Singer 2024* on Hunan Television.

Known for his distinctive voice and emotive melodies, Hai Lai A Mu

masterfully blends traditional ethnic vocals with modern music, preserving and promoting cultural heritage. His songs resonate with listeners worldwide, offering hope and comfort through powerful storytelling.

Organised by Star Planet, tickets for Hai Lai A Mu's World Tour in Malaysia will be available starting Jan 3, 2025, with prices from RM228.



(From left): Lee and Jung have decided to split amicably. – HALLYUBEATPIC

Lee Dong-Hwi, Jung Ho-Yeon confirm breakup

SOUTH Korean actors Lee Dong-Hwi and Jung Ho-Yeon have confirmed their breakup. The couple, who had been together since 2016, decided to part ways amicably.

While the exact reason for their split remains undisclosed, both parties have expressed their desire to maintain a positive relationship as colleagues.

"It is correct that Jung and Lee have broken up. They have decided to go back to being good colleagues," Jung's agency Saram

Entertainment said in a statement.

Jung, who gained international recognition for her role in the hit Netflix series *Squid Game*, has been open about her relationship with Lee. The couple often shared glimpses of their love life on social media and during public appearances.

Despite the breakup, both actors are expected to continue their successful careers in the entertainment industry. – Hallyubeat



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Gypsy King's last stand

Fury told there is 'only one fight' left for him by Joshua's promoter Hearn

BY DUNCAN BECH

TYSON FURY (*pic*) has been told he will have the opportunity to bounce back from his conclusive points defeat by Oleksandr Usyk in Saturday's rematch by taking on Anthony Joshua at Wembley.

Fury declined to say if he would fight on after he was beaten by an unanimous points decision in Riyadh, with all three judges awarding the decision to WBA, WBC and WBO champion Usyk by the score of 116-112.

The 36-year-old said "who knows?" when pushed on whether he will continue, adding he will make a decision next year having taken some time off following another gruelling showdown with the remarkable Usyk.

While his dream of becoming the heavyweight division's undisputed king is dead after successive losses to the Ukrainian master, the chance to claim domestic bragging rights over British rival Joshua is being dangled in front of him.

Eddie Hearn, Joshua's promoter, insists a Wembley showdown next year between the two would be a box office smash, even if both men are coming off losses. Joshua was knocked out by IBF champion Daniel Dubois in October.

"The reality is there's only one fight for Tyson Fury and that's

Anthony Joshua. It's the biggest fight in the history of British boxing and everyone will want to see it," Hearn told DAZN.

"That wasn't a Tyson Fury who looked finished. It wasn't a flat performance, it wasn't a poor performance. He didn't look gun shy or like his punch resistance was in question.

"Tyson Fury is still potentially at the peak of his powers, just not good enough to beat Oleksandr Usyk.

"For me AJ against Fury is the one.

One at Wembley and then back out here for Riyadh season. I will be pushing his excellency (Saudi Arabia's boxing powerbroker Turki Alalshikh) to make the fight."

Fury felt he had won and bitterly disputed the decision, while his promoter Frank Warren said he was "dumbfounded" by the scoring in the rematch at Kingdome Arena.

Despite conceding four stones and six inches in height, Usyk set the pace for the bulk of the contest, showing greater

skill and landing more and bigger shots with greater accuracy.

Fury was outstanding as the rivals produced another classic, albeit more of a chess match than May's dramatic first encounter, and the rounds were desperately close.

But the Gypsy King's output visibly decreased in the second half of the fight, with Usyk's left hand the most potent weapon of the night.

"Thanks to everyone who came and supported me. We move on. We go now into a new year and whatever that brings, we'll see," said Fury, who cut out the showboating for the rematch.

"The fight's done now, it's in the past. I've not got a decision. It is what it is and we move on. I'll go home to my family. I've not seen my kids for 12 weeks.

"You can't change decisions, I've done the best could. If I could have done any more then I would have done. And that's it.

"I felt good in there. I felt good. I had a good pace, I was on the front foot for 12 rounds. I enjoyed it. I took it more seriously. He never hurt me once. I've got a couple of flesh wounds and they'll be gone in two or three days." - The Independent



Teen Konstas to open against India

SAM KONSTAS will open the batting for Australia in the fourth Test against India, coach Andrew McDonald said yesterday, while voicing confidence leading batsman Travis Head will be fit to play.

Konstas was called up after selectors dumped Nathan McSweeney after just three Tests, with the 19-year-old tasked with fending off Indian pace spearhead Jasprit Bumrah alongside an under-performing Usman Khawaja.

"He'll play Boxing Day," McDonald told reporters, referring to the teenager as "composed, relaxed".

"We have said from the get-go, leading into this summer, that we wouldn't shy away and age was no barrier.

"What he's shown is an array of

shots and an ability to put pressure back on his opponents and he gets his opportunity.

"Really excited for him - Boxing Day, the biggest stage."

Konstas will become Australia's youngest Test debutant since current skipper Pat Cummins took the field against South Africa at Johannesburg in 2011

It could be a baptism of fire, with an expected 90,000 fans at the Melbourne Cricket Ground and temperatures forecast to reach 40°C tomorrow.

Konstas thrust himself into the frame after becoming the youngest player since Ricky Ponting to score two centuries in the same Sheffield Shield match.

He also slammed a century playing for the Prime Minister's XI against India.

The five-match series is tied at 1-1 after India won by 295 runs in Perth before being crushed by 10 wickets at Adelaide. The rain-affected third Test in Brisbane was drawn.

Head is the highest run scorer in the series, plundering aggressive centuries at both Adelaide and Brisbane. But he picked up a minor thigh strain at the Gabba.

McDonald said he expected him to play but Head still had "some things to work through".

"I'm pretty confident he'll play," he added. "He has been able to do his running. I think he will be fully functional come game time." - AFP

INSIDE EDGE

Proteas aim place in World Test final

SOUTH AFRICA are within touching distance of a place in next June's World Test Championship final at Lord's but must win at least one of their two Tests against Pakistan, which start with the Boxing Day encounter in Pretoria.

A run of five successive Test victories in the last five months - over the West Indies, Bangladesh and Sri Lanka - has catapulted South Africa to first in the WTC standings and given them a strong chance of a place against either Australia, India or Sri Lanka in the one-off final in London.

They get two chances to advance to the WTC final, hosting a second test at Newlands in Cape Town from Jan. 3-7, and with home advantage and a winning record against Pakistan will be expected to do so.

The young South African side have exceeded expectations and gained momentum since success in Guyana in August set them on a winning streak.

Meanwhile Pakistan have never won a Test series in South Africa, and lost their last seven Tests there.

The tourists also arrived without coach Jason Gillespie, who dramatically quit this month and has been replaced by former fast bowler Aqib Javed.

Stokes out for three months

ENGLAND Test captain Ben Stokes will be sidelined for at least three months after further tests revealed he has torn his left hamstring, the England and Wales Cricket Board said yesterday.

All-rounder Stokes, who missed four Tests after tearing the same hamstring in The Hundred domestic competition in August, sustained the injury in the third Test of England's 2-1 series win over New Zealand last week.

"Something else to overcome... go on then!" Stokes wrote on his X account.

"I've got so much more left in this tank and so much more blood sweat and tears to go through for my team and this shirt. There's a reason I have a Phoenix permanently inked on my body."

The 33-year-old all-rounder bowled 24 overs in New Zealand's first innings and was two balls into his 13th over of the second when he suffered the injury - a much heavier workload than in the first two tests.

"The Durham all-rounder will undergo surgery in January," the ECB added in a statement.

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SCAN ME

THE biggest sporting event of 2024 was without doubt the Parisian high-wire double-act of the Olympic Games followed by the Paralympics.

From a colourful, sometimes controversial and sodden opening ceremony to boxers caught up in a gender row to refugees on the podium, they served up many memorable moments.

RAIN ON THE PARADE

Organisers promised a spectacular opening ceremony and the rain-soaked boat parade on the River Seine ended up making global headlines but not for the expected reasons. Church leaders and conservatives were left outraged by a scene involving drag queens and lesbian DJ Barbara Butch that appeared to parody Jesus's Last Supper. Artistic director Thomas Jolly denied any such intention but he and others involved ended up facing vicious online harassment.

'MARCHONS, MARCHAND'

If Paris luxuriated in the honour of hosting the Games, Toulouse took French bragging rights for the exploits of its athletes with local rugby star Antoine Dupont securing Sevens gold and Leon Marchand dominating in the pool. The 22-year-old, urged on by the rhythmic chorus of "Leon, Leon" at the La Defence Arena, won five medals in total, four of them gold including a double in the space of two hours which sent the crowd into paroxysms of "joie". The downside of such instant celebrity? "I can't go out to restaurants like I used to anymore," he said when he got back to Toulouse. "I wear a cap and glasses. I try to hide a little."

BILES BOUNCES BACK

Simone Biles proved as popular a draw as the Eiffel Tower, the 1.42m bundle of gymnastics brilliance standing tall on her return to the Olympics after the trauma of Tokyo in 2021. In Japan she was forced to withdraw from most of the Games with a debilitating mental block known as the "twisties". Three years on, watched by an enraptured full house at Bercy Arena including her husband, NFL player Jonathan Owens, Tom Cruise and Lady Gaga, Biles resumed the gold run she had begun at Rio 2016. Biles pipped Rebeca Andrade for the coveted all-around crown on her last move on the floor. That was book-ended by titles with the US team and vault – where she executed her Yurchenko double pike, the Biles II, her sixth eponymous skill. Stumbles on the final day as tiredness – both mentally and physically – set in left her with silver behind Andrade on the floor. In a mark of her class as a person she bowed to the Brazilian on the podium.

LYLES JUST IN TIME

World champion Noah Lyles roared to victory in 9.79sec to claim gold in a dramatic men's Olympic 100m final in the closest finish in modern history – just five thousandths of a second separated him from Jamaica's Kishane Thompson. "I'm the man amongst all of them. I'm the wolf amongst wolves," said Lyles whose victory was only confirmed after a

Vive le France

Ten big moments of the 2024 Olympics



Tara Davis-Woodhall kisses her husband Hunter Woodhall in the stands after winning the women's long jump at the 2024 Paris Olympics. – REUTERS/SPIC



Korean podium selfie goes viral. – REUTERS/SPIC

photo-finish.

DJOKOVIC'S 'GREATEST ACHIEVEMENT'

At the age of 37, Novak Djokovic finally won an Olympic gold medal to go along with his 24 Grand Slam titles, describing the moment as his "greatest achievement". The Serb defeated Carlos Alcaraz, 16 years his junior, in a memorable final at Roland Garros where he has already been crowned French Open champion three times. Djokovic achieved his dream the hard way – having to defeat career-long

rival Rafael Nadal in the second round in the pair's 60th and what proved to be their final meeting. He then overcame aggravating a knee injury which had needed surgery in June during his quarterfinal win over Stefanos Tsitsipas.

THE GOLDEN COUPLE

One of the iconic snapshots of the Games came when Tara Davis-Woodhall celebrated winning the women's long jump by galloping over to kiss her husband Hunter Woodhall in the stands. A few

weeks later the roles were reversed at the Stade de France as Hunter, who had both legs amputated below the knee when he was 11, bounded over on his blades to kiss Tara after winning gold with an electrifying performance in the men's 400m T62 final at the Paralympics. "It has been honestly the craziest journey of our entire lives," said Tara.

KOREAN PODIUM SELFIE GOES VIRAL

Another Olympic snap that went viral was the selfie taken by the table tennis players from North Korea and South Korea, hailed as a rare show of cross-border unity. After South Korea won bronze and North Korea silver in the mixed doubles behind China, South Korea's Lim Jong-hoon took a group photo after the medal ceremony. North Korea's Ri Jong Sik and Kim Kum Yong, the South's Shin Yu-bin and the victorious Chinese team Wang Chuqin and Sun Yingsha all beamed into Lim's (South Korean-made) phone. While the photo was well received around the globe, it was viewed more dimly in Pyongyang: media reports in September said Kim and Ri were in hot water with the hierarchy and had been placed under "ideological scrutiny".

GENDER-ROW BOXER BEATS 'BULLYING'

On a raucous night at Roland Garros, Algerian gender-row boxer Imane Khelif claimed gold and used her platform to hit back at "attacks" and "bullying" before defiantly declaring: "I am a woman like any other." Together with Taiwan's Lin Yu-ting, who also fought in Paris, Khelif was disqualified from last year's world championships after failing gender eligibility tests. However they were cleared to compete in the Paris Olympic Paris, setting the stage for one of the biggest controversies of the Games. "I am fully qualified to take part, I am a woman like any other. I was born a woman, lived a woman and competed as a woman," said the 25-year-old.

DREAMS COME TREW

Australian skateboarding sensation Arisa Trew, just 14, won the women's park event to become her country's youngest ever gold medalist. Trew nailed a high-risk and high-speed final run in her trademark pink helmet, bringing the crowd to their feet at a sun-drenched Place de la Concorde. The event also featured 11-year-old Zheng Haoqiao, the youngest athlete ever to represent China at the Olympics.

REFUGEES ON PODIUM

The Refugee Paralympic team made a mark on the Games by winning its first-ever medals. Zakia Khudadadi, the first Afghan female taekwondo practitioner, became the first-ever member of the Refugee Team to win a medal when she secured a bronze in the women's K44-47kg category. "It's a reminder that people everywhere crave the same things in life: safety and a chance to fulfil their dreams," said Ruwendrini Menikdiwela, United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees.

AFP

Inter keep pace with leaders Atalanta

INTER MILAN saw off Como 2-0 yesterday to stretch their unbeaten run in Serie A to 11 games and move back to within three points of leaders Atalanta.

Defender Carlos Augusto headed in from a corner early in the second half before Marcus Thuram wrapped up a fourth successive league win with a thumping finish in stoppage time.

Inter goalkeeper Yann Sommer made a crucial save on the hour to deny Nico Paz an equaliser as Simone Inzaghi's side showed signs of weariness at the San Siro in what was their third outing in a week.

Thuram's goal was his 12th of the season and sent him level with Atalanta striker Mateo Retegui for the league lead.

"Marcus is a high-class player who always trains well and has adapted very quickly to the way we play," said Inzaghi.

"You have to congratulate Como for coming here and giving it their all, but we stayed focused and showed great maturity."

Third-placed Inter are a point behind Napoli but have played a game less than the top two teams after their match with Fiorentina was called off at the start

of December following Edoardo Bove's sudden collapse.

Reigning champions Inter visit lowly Cagliari this weekend and could put the pressure back on Atalanta, who are away to Lazio in the late game on Saturday.

Como, coached by Cesc Fabregas, slipped a spot to 16th and sit just one point clear of the relegation zone.

Fiorentina lost more ground in the title race after falling to a 2-1 home defeat by Udinese.

Moise Kean's early penalty gave Fiorentina the lead as they sought to shake off last weekend's loss to Bologna that snapped the club's eight-match winning streak in Serie A.

However, Udinese equalised shortly after halftime through Lorenzo Lucca and former France international Florian Thauvin curled in the winner from outside the area.

"The most important thing for me is not the goal but the victory. These are three important points against a very strong team," said Udinese captain Thauvin.

Udinese stayed ninth and are eight points off the European places. – AFP

SIDENETTING

Valencia sack coach Baraja

VALENCIA sacked head coach Ruben Baraja yesterday after a five-match winless streak in La Liga, the relegation-threatened club announced. The six-time Spanish champions – Baraja was a pivotal figure in their midfield in two of those title wins – sit second-bottom in La Liga with just 12 points from 17 matches. Valencia have not played outside the top flight since the 1986/87 season. Baraja, 49, had been in charge since February 2023, helping them avoid relegation before a ninth-placed finish last season. "The dynamic of results during this season has required a decision that has been very difficult to make, but which has been taken with the aim of turning the situation around and achieving better results," the club said. Valencia are next in action after the winter break against reigning La Liga champions Real Madrid on Jan 3.

Monza give Nesta the boot

SERIE A'S bottom club Monza sacked coach Alessandro Nesta yesterday, a day after a 2-1 loss to Juventus left them five points adrift of safety. Nesta, a World Cup winner with Italy in 2006 as a player, lasted just 20 games in charge in all competitions after being appointed boss in July. "The club thanks the coach for what he has done so far and wishes him the best for the future," Monza said in a statement. Nesta, 48, replaced Raffaele Palladino at the helm after he left for Fiorentina following two impressive seasons with Monza. Former Italy international Salvatore Bocchetti will take over from Nesta after signing a contract until 2027. The 38-year-old worked as an assistant at Verona and with the club's reserves and youth teams, but this is his first job as head coach at the top level. Monza have won only one of 17 league matches this term though and are in danger of dropping into Serie B.

Amorim questions Rashford's entourage

RUBEN AMORIM has questioned the "choices" of people surrounding Marcus Rashford while offering his support to the Manchester United striker.

Rashford sat out a third successive game on Sunday as United crashed to a 3-0 Premier League home defeat to Bournemouth, the 27-year-old having also been omitted for a 2-1 derby win at Manchester City and Thursday's 4-3 Carabao Cup quarterfinal loss at Tottenham.

Two days before that Spurs defeat, Rashford had said in an eye-catching interview that he was "ready for a new challenge and the next steps" of a career which began in the United academy.

"It is a hard situation but I understand that this kind of player have a lot of people around them, and making some choices that sometimes is not the first idea from the player," United boss Amorim told *Sky Sports* yesterday.

"So I understand I can separate things. I'm always here for helping Marcus as another player and they have to do what they have to do.

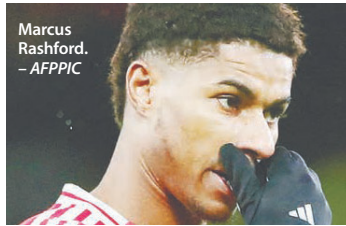
"I say they chose to do that interview because it's not just Marcus. I understand that so for me as a coach I'm just focused on the performance, the way he trains.

"The rest, I think, is better for me and the club to deal with that when the times comes. At the moment I'm just focused on improving Marcus.

"We need a lot in this moment, (from a) talented guy like Marcus, and I forget for now the interview. I just see what I see on the pitch."

United's defeat to the Cherries – their second successive defeat at Old Trafford – left them 13th in the Premier League at Christmas.

Amorim's side return to action at Wolves on Friday (1.30am) before hosting Newcastle next Tuesday (4am). – *The Independent*



Marcus Rashford.
– AFP/IC

Sharpe sets Marcus straight after quit talk

MANCHESTER UNITED outcast Marcus Rashford has been told he should've discussed his future with boss Ruben Amorim before making his desire to leave the club public.

In a bombshell interview a day after being excluded from United's squad in the Manchester derby, Rashford revealed that he was eyeing a new challenge away from Old Trafford.

Former United winger Lee Sharpe agrees that Rashford was wrong to undermine the Portuguese head coach, insisting they should have met behind closed doors to prevent miscommunication.

"You must keep things inside the club. Marcus should have spoken with the manager first, as speaking with the media can sometimes result in miscommunications," Sharpe told *Express Sport*.

"A new challenge can mean he is looking forward to a new challenge under Amorim, but the most probable new challenge is that he feels it's time for him to move on from Manchester United.

Sitting down with Amorim should and can still be the best option to identify the next step for Marcus and the club.

"Marcus has been brilliant for Manchester United over the years, but recently, he hasn't found the form of scoring 30 goals in a season.

"He doesn't seem to be playing with the same energy as he was, and this must be resolved for both player and club.

"You look at Amorim saying that a Manchester United with Rashford is better than one without him, so this can be motivation for Marcus to knuckle down and get back into the team and perform at the levels we know he can." – *Express Newspapers*

Saka blow for Gunners

Forward ruled out for 'many weeks' as Arteta admits 'it's not looking good'

■ BY HARRY LATHAM-COYLE

ARSENAL have suffered a significant injury blow with Bukayo Saka set for a spell on the sidelines after suffering a hamstring issue.

Saka was substituted just 24 minutes into the weekend win over Crystal Palace after sustaining the problem.

Manager Mikel Arteta suggested he was fearing a long lay-off after the 5-1 win and has now confirmed that the Arsenal star is set for "many weeks" out with a torn hamstring.

"It's not looking good," Arteta said of Saka's injury ahead of Arsenal's trip to Ipswich on Saturday (4.15am Malaysian time). "He's going to be out for many weeks.

"It's a huge blow but it's going to be a big exercise for us to overcome another challenge. I'm very optimistic he'll be back before the end of the season.

"(It's) another part of the development of a player. At some stage at this level you're going to get injured.

"Unfortunately, badly. It could have been much worse. It could have been something else that can take you out for a year.

"It is what it is. He's injured, we cannot change it. We're going to use this time now to help him."

Arteta also confirmed that Saka has taken news of the lay-off



Arsenal's Bukayo Saka (right) receives medical attention after sustaining an injury in the English Premier League match against Crystal Palace on Saturday. – *REUTERS/SPIC*

badly but still thinks he can contribute while on the sidelines.

"He was gutted," continued Arteta. "You can tell that he has not been injured because he was really, really emotional and really down.

"And we need to lift him up. It is a big part of his job. He will be fine but he is going to need a few days.

"He will immediately realise that he is so important in that

dressing room. His energy level, his body language, and how he communicates with the rest of the team has to be really good because it is the only way at the moment he can help, so he better do that well."

Saka has been in sparking recent form to keep Arsenal's hopes of a title tilt alive. The London club trail Premier League leaders Liverpool by six points and have played a game

more than Arne Slot's side.

His absence comes at a particularly hectic time, too, with Saka likely to miss the Carabao Cup semifinal against Newcastle and FA Cup third round clash with Manchester United early in January.

Arteta also confirmed that Raheem Sterling, a potential alternative to Saka in the forward line, will miss a few weeks of action. The former England international injured himself in training ahead of the Crystal Palace game.

The twin injuries could prompt Arsenal to seek a new winger in the January transfer window, though Arteta would not be drawn on the matter.

"I don't know," Arteta replied when asked if he will look to sign an option out wide next month.

"My intention right now is to get the best out of what we have. What is outside is not in our control.

"The preparation is done and we are ready if something happens. Obviously we didn't predict a situation with Bukayo and Raheem at the same time. We predicted more that it would be if something happened in the defensive line.

"If something has to happen, we will be open. But the main focus is now and how we can extract a lot of potential from this squad." – *The Independent*



New Saints boss Juric eyeing great escape

■ BY RACHEL STEINBERG

NEW Southampton boss Ivan Juric insists the Premier League's bottom side can do "something exceptional" in their relegation fight as he prepares to implement his "death metal" style of play.

The Croatian was in the stands for Sunday's goalless draw with Fulham as he awaited a work permit, and will take charge for the first time when Saints host West Ham tomorrow (11pm).

Juric revealed his new employers initially reached out two years ago when he was in charge of Torino, and while he remained at the Serie A side the Southampton project always remained a "dream."

The 49-year-old said: "It will be a very tough job and I know that in the history nobody stayed in the Premiership with this situation, but like I said, I think there are a lot of good players, and we have much better in some moments of the game.

"I am optimistic. I'm really optimistic. Even

the other day, I saw their mentality, and it's the first step to doing better.

"I think we can do something exceptional. The guys have to be very motivated to do something that never, nobody did.

"They don't know me but I know them. I said that I believe in them, they have quality, they can do it. Be positive, work hard, and everything is possible."

Asked about his rumoured preference for death metal music, Juric replied: "When I was young I liked death metal music a lot, and that's something I think my style of football is like metal music.

"Now a little bit less, I'm a little bit soft now, but it's always in my head, good metal music."

More tactically speaking Juric said his style was "work hard, press hard, play good, be intense, all this stuff.

"I think (the players) can do it. They are young, they are positive, they want to work hard. It's not easy to change the style immediately, but we have to be clever, not

throwing what they did in the past, but trying to put in some other things of course."

Southampton, with six points, are eight points from safety after Sunday's stalemate.

The former Croatia midfielder began his managerial career at Mantova before moving on to Crotona, Genoa and Hellas Verona.

He led Torino to three mid-table finishes in Serie A, forging a reputation for being in charge of defensively solid teams, before leaving them at the end of last season.

Juric replaced Daniele De Rossi as Roma boss in mid-September but lasted less than two months in the Italian capital after claiming only four wins from 12 games.

While some managers might be intimidated by the prospect of inheriting a relegation-battling side, Juric is unfazed.

He added: "It was a little bit of a dream, the Southampton opportunity, and I was thinking that life is short, I want to try new things and I want to travel to the other way of working, put myself in a difficult situation, and that's it." – *The Independent*



BY JAMIE BRAIDWOOD

TOTTENHAM star Dejan Kulusevski has called on Spurs to “learn” and take more control in games after the 6-3 defeat to Liverpool on Sunday.

Spurs were thrashed by the Premier League leaders on Sunday and Kulusevski accepted they could have handled the bigger moments better amid a defensive injury crisis.

Ange Postecoglou’s side were without first-choice defenders Micky van de Ven, Cristian Romero and Destiny Udogie, as well as goalkeeper Guglielmo Vicario, and made no changes from Thursday’s 4-3 win over Manchester United.

Postecoglou has come in for criticism for not adapting his attacking strategy during a busy run of games – with the Australian doubling down on his principles –

‘Change for the better’

Kulusevski calls on Tottenham to ‘learn’ from Liverpool thrashing

and Kulusevski said Tottenham need to be better.

The Sweden international, who did not give up the fight against Liverpool and has scored in five successive games for Spurs, said: “You have to improve, you have to find ways.

“Maybe today we should maybe let them have the ball more, but you know, that’s not how we play.

“So we went out, we gave everything. It didn’t work, maybe we will learn for the next time.

“You have to think about how are we physically? Who’s playing? How

many games we have played in the last week? Who are we playing? Have they rested for one week or something?

“You have to put everything in because it is like life. It’s not just black and white. It’s a lot of factors going into it.

“We have to learn because we conceded six goals. I can’t sit here and say that we’re doing something perfectly, we’re not.

“We have to change a little bit for the better, always try to change for the better.”

Postecoglou accepted that

Liverpool’s energy levels were higher after Spurs reached the Carabao Cup quarterfinals on Thursday and had one less day to prepare for the match at Tottenham Hotspur Stadium.

But he also clashed with reporters and said he was growing impatient at being asked the “same questions” as he insisted that injury issues are to blame for his side’s defensive frailties.

“I have massive admiration for the efforts these players are putting in for this club at the moment,” Postecoglou said.

“We know what a difficult situation it is and that’s not going to

change in the short term. We’ve just got to push on.”

James Maddison rallied around Tottenham’s depleted squad and insisted they will stick together.

“To concede six goals at home obviously hurts,” Maddison told *SpursPlay*. “To manage to score another three against arguably the best team in the world at the minute, there is positives there but hard to look at, at the minute.

“I am proud of the lads who kept going. It can be very easy to sit back and not let any more chances or keep a scoreline to a minimal, especially when they get the fifth.

“To be fair to the lads, they kept going, we scored another couple and we’ll keep going and dig in.

“We had a great night, a brilliant night here on Thursday and a really difficult one (against Liverpool). The good and the bad, you’ve got to stick together.” – *The Independent*

We are living the parallel, says baffled Guardiola

BY RICHARD JOLLY

PEP GUARDIOLA believes Manchester City are labouring through the opposite of their long winning runs as he rued football’s parallel lives.

City were beaten 2-1 by Aston Villa on Saturday to suffer their ninth defeat in a 12-game spell when they have only triumphed once.

And it left manager Guardiola reflecting that it has turned their usual form on its head.

“Always when we win a lot of games and titles I say we are going to lose games,” he said.

“When we won 13 or 14 games or 10 games and we lose one or draw one and it is, ‘what happened? Why you draw or lose a game?’ So it is football.

“We won a lot, it was exceptional, and now we are living the parallel. We didn’t expect (it), I didn’t personally and I don’t know what will be the outcome after that, so life gives you that. We have to deal with it.”

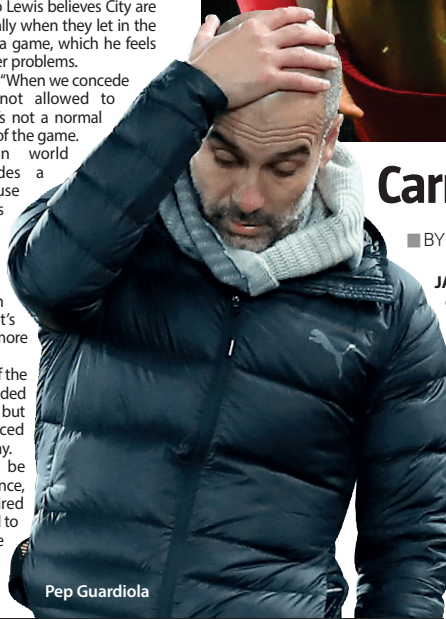
Defender Rico Lewis believes City are struggling mentally when they let in the opening goal in a game, which he feels can trigger further problems.

He explained: “When we concede it’s like we’re not allowed to concede. As if it’s not a normal thing that’s part of the game.

“Everyone in world football concedes a goal but because we hold ourselves to such high standards, when we concede we’re so disappointed in ourselves, that’s when you’ll see more mistakes come.

“At the start of the season we conceded a few goals first but we just bounced back straight away.

“That can be down to confidence, many things, tired legs. But we need to get back to the way we want to be.” – *The Independent*



Pep Guardiola



Virgil van Dijk. – AFP/IC

No deadline on contract negotiations: Van Dijk

LIVERPOOL captain Virgil van Dijk insists there is “no deadline” regarding his contract situation.

The Netherlands international’s current deal expires in the summer and from next week he would be able to negotiate with overseas clubs about moving at the end of the season.

However, it is understood the 33-year-old’s preference is to stay at Anfield and the player himself is just concentrating on a campaign which has them top of the Premier League and Champions League tables.

“There is no deadline at all. We will see what the future brings. Is there an update? No,” he told reporters after the 6-3 win over Tottenham.

Van Dijk is one of three key players whose deals are entering their final six months, with Trent Alexander-Arnold and Mohamed Salah the others.

Salah moved fourth on Liverpool’s all-time list of scorers with 229 after his two goals against Spurs and his numbers are very similar to his first season at the club (2017-18) when he netted 44 times.

He currently has 18 this term, including 15 in the Premier League – two clear of

Manchester City striker Erling Haaland – and also has 15 assists.

In terms of overall contributions he is comfortably the leading player in Europe’s top five leagues, with Eintracht Frankfurt forward Omar Marmoush second with 29.

Salah was a key part of Liverpool’s victory over Tottenham and as his goals and assists keep coming, the calls for a new contract get louder and louder.

Speaking with *Sky Sports* after the Spurs win, Salah was asked if he had any updates on a potential new deal and his response was: “No, nothing.”

Van Dijk hopes the Egypt international, who will be 33 in the summer, can go on to have his best season for the club.

“The numbers speak for themselves,” he added. “He’s a very special athlete. He’s done amazingly for the club and hopefully he can play his best season ever for the club, stay important with his goals and assists and be clinical.

“He is a professional. We’ve been there, he’s been there, so onto the next (game). And next season? I don’t know.” – *The Independent/Agencies*

Carra aims fresh dig at Postecoglou

BY CHRIS WILSON

JAMIE CARRAGHER has once again criticised Ange Postecoglou’s tactical set up, commenting that “nobody has ever won anything playing like that” after Tottenham’s 6-3 loss to Liverpool.

Carragher was speaking on *Sky Sports* after the match, which Liverpool dominated from start to finish.

The scoreline arguably flattered Spurs after a disjointed performance that allowed the visitors to create nine big chances and take 24 shots.

“Surely there’s something you can try to do. How are you going to stop Liverpool scoring goals today?” said Carragher in the studio.

“I just use my own experience as a player, and just think if I was an 18-year-old centreback playing against that front three, I’d need help. We’re not good enough to take them on.

“So this idea of ‘what was I supposed to do?’, you’ve got to alter things, you’ve got to tweak things now,” he added.

Postecoglou has come in for criticism from some sections of the media and the fanbase after sticking with a gung-ho approach that often sees Spurs both score and concede plenty of goals, as evidenced by this result and their 4-3 win over Manchester United in the Carabao Cup.

Carragher has criticised the Australian’s approach in the past, and he was clearly confused by Spurs’ set-up once again, stating that “within five minutes of this game starting, we all

knew Liverpool were going to win this comfortably.

“It was so easy for Liverpool, and no matter how many injuries they (Spurs) have got, it shouldn’t have been that easy, and that comes down to the manager not relenting on how he wants his team to set up,” said Carragher.

“I get the idea it’s not about a style of play. Every manager who comes in has a different way of doing things.

“You’ve got to have your idea, you’ve got to have something that’s a little bit different that makes you special. But when you’ve got your best team, not when you’re down to the bare bones.

“Nobody has ever won anything playing like that,” he added. – *The Independent*

RESULTS & STANDINGS

SERIE A: 1 (Kean 8) **Udinese 2** (Lucca 49, Thauvin 57), **Inter Milan 2** (Carlos Augusto 48, Thuram 90+2) **Como 0**.

| | P | W | D | L | F | A | Pts |
|-------------|----|----|----|----|----|----|-----|
| Atalanta | 17 | 13 | 1 | 3 | 42 | 19 | 40 |
| Napoli | 17 | 12 | 2 | 3 | 26 | 12 | 38 |
| Inter Milan | 16 | 11 | 4 | 1 | 42 | 15 | 37 |
| Lazio | 17 | 11 | 1 | 5 | 32 | 24 | 34 |
| Fiorentina | 16 | 9 | 4 | 3 | 29 | 13 | 31 |
| Juventus | 17 | 7 | 10 | 0 | 28 | 13 | 31 |
| Bologna | 16 | 7 | 7 | 2 | 23 | 18 | 28 |
| AC Milan | 16 | 7 | 5 | 4 | 25 | 16 | 26 |
| Udinese | 17 | 7 | 2 | 8 | 21 | 26 | 23 |
| Roma | 17 | 5 | 4 | 8 | 23 | 23 | 19 |
| Empoli | 17 | 4 | 7 | 6 | 16 | 19 | 19 |
| Torino | 17 | 5 | 4 | 8 | 17 | 22 | 19 |
| Genoa | 17 | 3 | 7 | 7 | 14 | 26 | 16 |
| Lecce | 17 | 4 | 4 | 9 | 11 | 29 | 16 |
| Parma | 17 | 3 | 6 | 8 | 23 | 33 | 15 |
| Como | 17 | 3 | 6 | 8 | 18 | 30 | 15 |
| Verona | 17 | 5 | 0 | 12 | 21 | 40 | 15 |
| Cagliari | 17 | 3 | 5 | 9 | 16 | 28 | 14 |
| Venezia | 17 | 3 | 4 | 10 | 17 | 30 | 13 |
| Monza | 17 | 1 | 7 | 9 | 15 | 23 | 1 |

Resolute duo

Pearly-Thinaah aim to carry 2024 World Tour Finals momentum into 2025

NATIONAL NO. 1 women's doubles pair, Pearly Tan-M. Thinaah, may have found their rhythm too late in the recently-concluded World Tour Finals (WTF) 2024 in Hangzhou, China, but they are determined to carry the positive momentum into the 2025 season.

Despite losing all Group A matches in the 2024 World Tour Finals (WTF), their final tournament of the year, Pearly singled out their last match against the world No. 1 pair Liu Sheng Shu-Tan Ning, as a key moment to build on, hoping to carry that energy into the Malaysia Open 2025 next month.

Pearly-Thinaah fought hard before going down 9-21, 21-18, 18-21, to the home pair in the season finale held at the Hangzhou Olympic Sports Centre Gymnasium.

"We are still positive although we could not

advance from the group but we were able to find our gameplan in the last match and we hope to maintain that momentum for the Malaysia Open 2025.

"Since we are playing at home, we hope to play at our best. No matter win or lose we just want to have a good show for the audience to enjoy," she told reporters after a training session in Kuala Lumpur yesterday.

Pearly-Thinaah opened their third WTF campaign on the wrong foot, losing to Japan's top pair Nami Matsuyama-Chiharu Shida 21-13, 17-21, 18-21 and suffered another defeat to India's Treesa Jolly-Gayatri Gopichand Pullela 19-21, 19-21.

Pearly also hoped to stay fit and healthy as well as improve their gameplan to weather the new challenges next season.

Meanwhile, Thinaah picked their fine run in

their first Olympic Games in Paris 2024 as well as winning the Hong Kong Open as the main highlights for the 2024 season.

Pearly-Thinaah made history by becoming Malaysia's first women's doubles pair to reach the semifinals at the Olympics.

However, they missed out of a chance to reach the finals when they fell to China's Chen Qing Chen-Jia Yi Fan, 12-21, 21-18, 15-21.

They ended their commendable debut at the Olympic Games in fourth place as they came up short against Matsuyama-Shida, 11-21, 11-21.

The world No. 6 pair clinched their only title by clinching the Hong Kong Open 2024 as they stunned Sheng Shu-Tan Ning 21-14, 21-14 as well as secured two runner-up spots this year, namely Korea Open 2024 and Arctic Open 2024. - Bernama

SIDENETTING

Rhinos book semis ticket

SABAH FC have secured a spot in the Malaysia Cup semifinals, where they will face Sri Pahang FC (the Elephants), after edging past Kuching City FC with a narrow 1-0 aggregate victory in the quarterfinals. In the second-leg quarterfinal match, the Rhinos settled for a goalless draw against their Borneo neighbours at the Likas Stadium in Kota Kinabalu on Monday. The match saw Kuching City FC creating more attacking opportunities, but Sabah FC's defence, marshalled by captain Dominic Tan, stood firm to absorb the visitors' onslaught. The hosts had a nervy moment in the 51st minute when goalkeeper Damien Lim brought down Jordan Mintah inside the penalty box but referee Suhaizi Shukri decided against awarding a penalty after a Video Assistant Referee (VAR) check. In the first-leg quarterfinal held on Dec 15 at Stadium Negeri, Kuching, Sabah FC secured a 1-0 win against Kuching City FC, thanks to a goal by Muhammad Farhan Roslan.

Kelantan FA suspended

THE Kelantan Football Association (Kafa) becomes the second affiliate of the Football Association of Malaysia (FAM) to be suspended, effective yesterday. The Executive Committee of the governing body (FAM) unanimously agreed with the proposed action to suspend Kafa's membership, said FAM in a statement yesterday. "The decision

to suspend Kafa was made based on Article 17 of the FAM Statute, which states that the FAM Executive Committee can suspend the membership of any member. The decision on the suspension was made based on FAM's letter dated Dec 21, 2024 to Kafa, which relates to the decision of the FAM Internal Disputes Committee meeting regarding complaints against the procedures for conducting the 65th Kafa Annual Congress and the election of the Kafa executive committee for the 2024-2028 session," the statement said. On Dec 19, the FAM Internal Disputes Committee meeting decided that the 65th Kafa Congress and the Kafa executive committee election for the 2024-2028 Session were invalid and that the Sports Commissioner's office had been notified. The reason being, there were affiliates who were not allowed to attend and not invited to the congress, present, while the regulations and procedures for conducting the Kafa Congress were not made in an orderly and procedural manner.

Muhammad Afham eyes top-five finish

YOUNG national golfer Muhammad Afham Othman aims to secure a top-five position at the 2025 Junior World Cup tournament in Florida, the United States, next month. Muhammad Afham will depart for the country today to participate in the prestigious tournament, which is scheduled to take place from Jan 3-5. The 13-year-old from Gua Musang said he will be accompanied by his father,

Sabah's Joao Pedro (right) in action against Kuching City in the Malaysia Cup match at Likas Stadium on Monday night. - BERNAMAPIC



Otman Ismail, 64, and coach Dinie Zakie throughout his 13-day stay there. Muhammad Afham said he qualified for the tournament after finishing runner-up in the Thailand Junior Championship last month. "I didn't expect to be selected as one of the top five to qualify for Florida because according to the original plan, my involvement at that time was to gain experience," he said after a ceremony in Kota Bharu

yesterday to celebrate Muhammad Afham representing Malaysia in the US. Muhammad Afham said that he had previously been unable to decide on his participation since the travel expenditure to the US was quite high, but his dream of playing there has been fulfilled. "Thankfully, through contributions from several parties, my dream of going there has finally come true," he said.

World silat champ Thamaraj dreams of more titles

NATIONAL silat exponent V. Thamaraj, who became the world champion at the World Pencak Silat Championships in Abu Dhabi, United Arab Emirates (UAE), cannot wait for the new year.

On Sunday, Thamaraj emerged among the senior silat exponents who contributed one of the six gold medals at the World Pencak Silat Championship, which also saw Malaysia take home nine silvers and four bronze medals.

The National Junior squad also returned home with five gold, four silver and four bronze medals.

The 28-year-old, who currently serves at the 9th Komp of the Royal Military Police Corps (KPTD) in Sibul, Sarawak, is dreaming of more titles in 2025 after creating history by becoming world champion in the Men's Free Class after defeating Uzbekistan's Khudoyberdiev Diyobek.

He said the victory over Khudoyberdiev was more of revenge for his previous defeat, thus giving him confidence to excel on the international stage in the future.

"I have met him (Khudoyberdiev) before but the victory was cancelled because of (the punch) that hit the neck. It was like a gross violation.

"The next tournament is the Asian Championships in Uzbekistan next year. My target is definitely to win gold for Malaysia after silver medals in the last two editions," he said.

Narrating the journey of Thamaraj who was originally involved in taekwondo, Malaysian Armed Forces Silat Association (ATM) secretary Major Noorsyahiddawati Abdullah Sani said she was excited about the transition to silat in a short period of time by the individual from Sungai Petani, Kedah.

"Actually, he is a taekwondo exponent, but was more interested in silat. So we trained him, sent him to the National Silat Championship in 2022 and from there he was absorbed into the national squad on his achievements so far this year," she said. - Bernama

Tang Jie-Ee Wei draw inspiration from Chinese star

MALAYSIA'S top mixed doubles pair, Chen Tang Jie and Toh Ee Wei, have drawn significant inspiration from the off-court discipline of former Chinese badminton star Zheng Si Wei.

Ee Wei highlighted that Si Wei's disciplined lifestyle played a key role in his success, alongside his partner, Huang Ya Qiong.

"They are a world-class pair, and we have learned a great deal from them," she shared.

"However, there's still much we need to improve, and the most important thing is to remain humble, as we strive to reach the

highest level," she told reporters after a training session in Kuala Lumpur yesterday.

Si Wei, who retired following the 2024 World Tour Finals, enjoyed a highly successful career, winning numerous major titles with Ya Qiong, including a gold medal at the Paris 2024 Olympic Games, and three world championship titles.

The 27-year-old, who called it a day in badminton last month to spend more time with family, bid farewell from the sport on a high note, by winning the WTF 2024 title with Ya

Qiong, seeing off Tang Jie-Ee Wei 21-18, 14-21, 21-17 in the season finale, held in Hangzhou, China.

Looking ahead to the 2025 season, Ee Wei is focused on delivering her best performance at the Malaysia Open 2025, scheduled from Jan 7 to 12, at the Axiata Arena.

As such, the 24-year-old is determined not to let the opportunity of playing on home soil slip away, setting her sights on winning the season opener, alongside Tang Jie, next month.

Meanwhile, Tang Jie, who had the honour of

playing in Si Wei's final match, expressed hope that when he and Ee Wei retire one day, they will receive a similarly heartfelt send-off from the home fans, just as Si Wei did.

"I hope we can learn not only from Si Wei's professionalism on the court, but also his discipline off the court.

"Not every player gets the chance to compete against a legend in their final match. I hope that when we retire, we can experience an environment like that (WTF 2024)," he said. - Bernama



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SCAN ME



WORLD CHAMPION...
 V. Thamaraj (left) arrives at the Kuala Lumpur International Airport yesterday after winning the 20th World Pencak Silat Championship in Abu Dhabi, United Arab Emirates on Monday. - BERNAMAPIC



Vive le France

Story on page 28



BETMGM
 'Change for the better'

Story on page 30

Last X'mas for Pep?

Dark clouds over Guardiola's future as City languish 12 points behind runaway leaders Liverpool

CONCERNS may be rising that Pep Guardiola could quit Manchester City for the same reason he left Barcelona after a disheartening 2-1 loss to Aston Villa on Saturday.

The defeat marks City's ninth defeat in 12 games, casting a shadow over Guardiola's future despite having signed a new contract until 2027 just last month.

This slump contrasts sharply with the dizzying success of City's recent treble triumph 18 months ago.

But one could draw similarities with how his tenure ended at Barcelona, where he led the team to unprecedented success before stepping down in 2012.

Despite being lauded as one of the greatest teams ever under his leadership, Barcelona's relentless successes eventually took their toll.

And City may be going through the same process after reaching new

heights, perhaps finding motivation has become a growing concern.

"I felt as if I could no longer lift the team," the Catalan great told *Audi* in 2014 (via *The Mirror*). "We were incredibly successful.

"Winning 14 trophies in only four years was the greatest period in the club's history.

"But gradually I found it more and more difficult to motivate myself and to motivate the team. That is when you know it is time to walk away."

Like that Barca line-up of 2012, City have experienced a decline from their highs and have concerns over an ageing squad.

Guardiola's men are seventh in the Premier League, 22nd in the new Champions League table and have already been eliminated from the Carabao Cup.

The 53-year-old coach has won six Premier League crowns from a possible eight at City, not to mention one

Champions League title, two FA Cups and four League Cups.

However, their recent downturn demonstrates even they can be affected by the cyclical nature of sport.

There are concerns over players like Kyle Walker (34), Ederson (31), Ilkay Gundogan (34) and injury-prone Kevin De Bruyne (33) being past their primes.

And with a rash of senior contracts set to expire in 2026 and 2027, it seems City may well be in need of a refresh.

There is also the small matter for City of their hearing into 130 charges of alleged financial misconduct.

The serious allegations have loomed over the club for some time now, with the verdict expected to be delivered some time in early 2025.

Between this uncertainty and the recent disappointment caused by on-field results, motivation appears to be at a low at the Etihad.

And it wouldn't be the first time this issue has prompted Guardiola to sever

ties with a club out of concern he can no longer have his desired impact.

In a candid discussion with *Sports Mole*, expert Steven McNerney suggests that while Guardiola should be afforded time to rectify the club's current dilemmas, his perceived inability to adjust to the evolving demands of modern football is a growing concern.

McNerney emphasised that there is no overnight solution to heal the team's woes, stating, "I'm not going to moan about Pep ever. Pep's a legend.

"He's got so much credit in the bank it's ridiculous, but he keeps expressing concerns about 'how does this change?' and wanting his players back."

He hints that Guardiola's repeated mentions of injuries might be affecting the morale of the players on the pitch.

"The players are exhausted and tired," McNerney adds, addressing the issue of fitness within the squad.

"They're running out of gas, and

while I'm sure Guardiola is working hard behind-the-scenes, the public acknowledgment of the team's struggles may have a psychological impact on the squad's belief."

Despite concerns, McNerney advocates for Guardiola's retention, insisting he deserves the chance to turn things around given his track record of success.

"Guardiola needs the right players to implement his vision. He has earned the right for a rebuild. If he can bring in new, youthful players post-treble, then let's see how he does."

As Guardiola navigates this challenging period, the club's future remains uncertain. He must find solutions swiftly, with a pivotal match against Sean Dyche's Everton awaiting tomorrow (8.30pm Malaysian time).

With three consecutive losses hanging over his squad, the pressure continues to mount. - Express Newspapers/Agencies