



**Go easy on processed cheese, public warned**

High sodium content linked to hypertension, increased risk of heart disease and stroke, says academic.

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# Aye to opt-out organ donation

Society says policy would boost number of donors and save thousands of lives, but cultural sensitivities and religious beliefs pose challenges in implementation.

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Despite its poor condition, the park still attracts visitors because of its easy access.  
— ADIB RAWI YAHYA/THESUN

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## MEF keen to help PM shape Asean policies

As bloc chair, Malaysia's role critical in strengthening intra-regional trade, digital transformation and supply chain resilience: Federation chief

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## Rundown Commonwealth Hill park a sorry sight

Broken plaques and monuments, overgrown weeds, overflowing rubbish and structures defaced with graffiti greet visitors to once iconic site.

# MEF keen to help Anwar shape Asean policies

► 'Msia's role as bloc chairman critical in providing leadership to adapt to challenges by strengthening intra-regional trade, digital transformation and supply chain resilience'

BY JOSHUA PURUSHOTMAN  
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**PETALING JAYA:** The Malaysian Employers Federation (MEF) is keen to work with Prime Minister Datuk Seri Anwar Ibrahim to shape Asean policies as the country has assumed the chairmanship of the bloc on Jan 1.

MEF president Datuk Dr Syed Hussain Syed Husman told *theSun* the chairmanship provides excellent opportunities for Asean to achieve rapid transformation.

"Malaysia's role is critical in providing leadership on how the region must adapt to challenges by strengthening intra-regional trade, digital transformation and supply chain resilience.

"Anwar is in a position to implement the Asean Economic Community (AEC) 2025 blueprint, under which are key matters such as digital economy integration, promoting green energy transitions and addressing food security."

He said these are highly critical issues due to global supply chain uncertainties, and with Malaysia's Asean chairmanship, MEF believes the bloc will be strengthened, intra-trade and investment promoted and climate change addressed.

Syed Hussain is also chairman of the Asean Confederation of Employers (ACE), whose members include nine other Asean employer organisations, and the Confederation of Asia

Pacific Employers (Cape), whose 20 members comprise employers and business organisations throughout the Asia Pacific.

He said ACE, which will hold its meeting in the first quarter of 2025, could go a long way in supporting Malaysia's Asean chairmanship, while Cape can be leveraged for wider influence on policy matters.

"As the ACE and Cape chairman, I will ensure MEF pushes initiatives that address access to education, labour mobility through mutual recognition arrangements, wider social security coverage and enhancements to worker protection."

He said with Anwar's vast international experience and exposure, he would lead Asean towards a more inclusive, sustainable and collaborative future.

"Malaysia's Asean chairmanship comes at a time when the bloc is facing various challenges - from economic recovery to geopolitical uncertainties. These require decisive leadership, collaborative solutions and a commitment to its founding principles of unity and cooperation through consensus building."

Syed Hussain said Anwar has vast political expertise and is a visionary with strong diplomatic acumen to guide Asean toward a more prosperous, inclusive and sustainable future.

He added that he is keen to work in partnership with the Madani government and would make recommendations in tandem

with his positions as he sees the importance of inclusivity and people-centric policies within Asean.

He said MEF is also eager to assist Anwar in enhancing youth and civil society engagement within its processes because empowering them and the relevant stakeholders would bridge the gap between policy-making and on-ground realities to ensure Asean policies resonate with and benefit the 680 million citizens within the bloc.

"Our 2025 ACE chairmanship reflects our influence in the Asean business and labour ecosystem, which means we can help Malaysia to shape regional policies related to labour, employment and businesses.

"With this, our ACE and Cape stewardship present opportunities for MEF to further Anwar's vision for the bloc and advocate progressive employment practices, including workplace modernisation, digital transformation and sustainability."

Syed Hussain said under its ACE chairmanship, MEF would lead initiatives for greater tripartite collaborations among Asean, the International Labour Organisation (ILO) and the International Organisation of Employers (IOE).

"We are keen to help Asean harmonise labour standards and practices across the bloc as this will enable greater economic integration and cross-border investments, especially since MEF is well-positioned to address the challenges faced by MSMEs in less-developed Asean economies to ensure inclusive growth.

"Malaysia and Anwar can count on our support and backing as we believe our partnership will result in more significant roles as we represent Asean employers in global platforms such as the ILO and IOE."

## Vague FB post by Pasir Mas MP questioned

**KUALA LUMPUR:** A cryptic post by Pasir Mas MP Fadhli Shaari on social media has led many politicians and elected representatives to question the motives behind it.

Umno Youth Chief Datuk Dr Muhamad Akmal Saleh shared his view in a brief post on his Facebook page on Saturday, stating that Fadhli should explain what his post meant as it did not come across as something "a true man would do".

"If it's so hard to say, we can meet to ask YB directly," the Merlimau assemblyman said.

Fadhli's post was apparently related to Umno's decision to cancel the solidarity rally in support of former prime minister Datuk Seri Najib Abdul Razak at the Palace of Justice in Putrajaya on Monday.

"Disangka jantan berkokok nyaring, rupanya ayam betina bertelur sebiji. Disergah biawak, digadai reban," was what Fadhli posted on his Facebook page.

Umno secretary-general Datuk Dr Asyraf Wajdi Dusuki clarified in a statement that the decision to cancel the rally was to honour a decree by His Majesty the King of Malaysia Sultan Ibrahim, who said that any request for a pardon or sentence reduction must be submitted by the convict for consideration by the Pardons Board chaired by the King, as well as because the IGP had not approved the gathering.

Several government MPs also shared their opinions about Fadhli's post, stating that it made him seem treasonous to the King.

Sungai Petani MP Dr Mohammed Taufiq Johari said the post caused confusion as it was made immediately after Istana Negara's statement on the matter and stressed that such actions were unacceptable and showed PAS's true stand towards the royal institution.

"(Let this be) a stern warning for PAS to stop belittling the royal institution and respect the King's sovereignty and powers as enshrined in the Federal Constitution." - Bernama

## S'wak to disburse aid via e-wallet to prevent misuse

**KUCHING:** The use of the e-wallet app SPay Global (SPay) as the medium to distribute the Sarawak Basic Needs Assistance ensures that recipients utilise the funds strictly for essential needs, said Sarawak Premier Tan Sri Abang Johari Abang Openg.

He said providing assistance in the form of vouchers or cash could lead to misuse of the funds.

"We have evaluated the methods (vouchers and cash) and I see that if it is given in cash, there is a possibility the money might not be spent on rice but on other things.

"With vouchers, they could also be exchanged for cash at stores, so misuse is still possible. We want to ensure that families have at least rice, which is why we opted for a digital method," he said at a media conference after visiting the Sarawak Service Centre yesterday.

He added that the use of SPay also enables the state government to collect data on gross household income and monitor the spending patterns of Sarawakians.

Abang Johari also said the Sarawak government would mobilise administrative machinery statewide to assist in the implementation of the Sarawak Basic Needs Assistance programme, involving residents, district officers, local authorities and Sarawak Service Centres.

When tabling the Sarawak Budget 2025 in November, Abang Johari announced the programme as a one-off annual aid ranging from RM250 to RM800, depending on eligibility categories such as single individuals, households and senior citizens.

He also revealed that based on the Rahmah Cash Aid recipient list, 886,288 individuals are eligible for the Sarawak Basic Needs Assistance, with a total allocation of RM464.5 million.



Abang Johari being briefed during his visit to the Sarawak Service Centre at the Kuching Urban Transformation Centre yesterday. - BERNAMAPIC

"Those not listed under Rahmah Cash Aid but meeting eligibility criteria can apply from Feb 1 to March 31.

"Sarawakians who qualify but have not registered with SPay need not worry, as registration is open year-round," he said, adding that the programme launch will take place in the Serian division on Feb 18.

He said the aid would be credited in stages to the SPay accounts of recipients starting next month, with efforts underway to streamline SPay redemption processes over the next six months.

So far, 27% of eligible Sarawakians have redeemed their aid through the SPay app. - Bernama

## S'pore PM to attend retreat

**PUTRAJAYA:** Singapore Prime Minister Lawrence Wong is in Malaysia to attend the 11th Malaysia-Singapore Leaders' Retreat today and tomorrow.

The Foreign Ministry said in a statement Wong is accompanied by his spouse Loo Tze Lui, Deputy Prime Minister and Trade and Industry Minister Gan Kim Yong and other ministers.

"Prime Minister Wong will be accorded an official welcoming ceremony at Perdana Putra Complex in Putrajaya, followed by a delegation meeting of the Leaders' Retreat with Prime Minister Datuk Seri Anwar Ibrahim.

"A joint press statement will be issued following the retreat."

Both sides are expected to take stock of Malaysia-Singapore bilateral relations and discuss regional and international issues of mutual interest.

"Both leaders are also scheduled to witness the exchange of a joint agreement on Johor-Singapore Special Economic Zone, six MoUs and one letter of intent on education, women and social welfare, climate change, carbon capture and storage, urban development and combating transnational crimes."

- Bernama

## Selangor PH lodges report over alleged defamatory post

**SHAH ALAM:** Selangor Pakatan Harapan (PH) has filed a police report against an opposition assemblyman accused of posting defamatory content targeting Prime Minister Datuk Seri Anwar Ibrahim.

Selangor PH vice-chairman Azli Yusof condemned the accusations, which falsely alleged that the prime minister supported actions dishonouring or betraying the previous Yang di-Pertuan Agong Al-Sultan Abdullah Ri'ayatuddin Al-Mustafa Billah Shah.

In response, Selangor PH has urged authorities, particularly police and the Malaysian Communications and Multimedia Commission, to conduct a comprehensive investigation into the social media accounts of the individual to identify those responsible.

"What is particularly troubling is that this post appeared just one day after Sultan of Selangor Sultan Sharafuddin Idris Shah issued a statement expressing concern over the rise in character assassination," Azli said.

"We, in PH, are committed to fostering a culture of *rahmah*, centred on collaboration to build the nation.

"This contrasts with the climate of defamation and divisiveness that threatens to tear it apart," he added.

Azli, who is also Shah Alam MP, was speaking outside the Shah Alam district police headquarters and was accompanied by Selangor PH information chief Abbas Salimi Che Adzmi @ Azmi.

He urged all political leaders to ensure the accuracy of any public statements or information released.

"We will also be filing police reports across districts and states, not just from PH but also from Parti Amanah," Azli said.

An initial report was filed by Selangor Amanah Mobilisation Bureau secretary Abdul Muhaimin Abu Bakar.

He claimed to have seen screenshots circulating in WhatsApp groups and on social media platforms, featuring a fabricated and defamatory image involving the prime minister. — Bernama

## Ministry acts on staff shortage, healthcare reform

**PUTRAJAYA:** The Health Ministry will prioritise addressing human resource challenges, including staff shortage and maldistribution this year, said its minister Datuk Seri Dr Dzulkefly Ahmad.

"This requires collaboration across government agencies, including the Finance Ministry and the Public Service Department.

"I am aware the public is counting on us to resolve this issue. *Insyallah*, we will do our best. We have a dedicated team working on this," he said during a press conference following the delivery of his New Year mandate to ministry staff.

He also outlined his vision for the ministry's workforce to implement national healthcare initiatives this year.

Under his leadership, the ministry will focus on executing a series of action plans that have been in development over the past two years.

One of the ministry's key priorities this year will be raising public awareness on the importance of disease prevention.

Dzulkefly also disclosed plans to transform the healthcare financing system and address rising medical costs by introducing diagnosis-related groups and clinical risk groups. — Bernama

# Experts support 'opt-out' organ donation policy

■ BY QIRANA NABILLA MOHD RASHIDI  
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**PETALING JAYA:** The Malaysian Society of Transplantation has expressed support for the implementation of an "opt-out" policy for organ donation, but its president Dr Mohamad Zaimi Abdul Wahab cautioned that such a policy would come with challenges.

Under an opt-out system, all Malaysians would be presumed as organ donors unless they explicitly choose to opt out.

Mohamad Zaimi, who is also a consultant nephrologist at Kuala Lumpur Hospital, highlighted the urgency of addressing the issue, pointing to recent data that shows 9,641 patients in Malaysia are waiting for life-saving organ transplants.

This includes 9,211 adults and 397 children waiting for kidney transplants.

"Over 52,000 Malaysians are currently undergoing dialysis and the waiting period for a kidney transplant often exceeds five years,"

➤ Initiative aims to address shortage and boost availability amid growing number of individuals on transplant waiting list

he said.

"Many patients die before receiving a transplant due to the limited availability of organs."

According to the Clinical Transplantation and Research website, Malaysian surgeons performed only 168 organ transplants from deceased donors and 544 involving living donors between 2017 and 2022.

"An opt-out policy could bring significant benefits by increasing the number of available organs and saving thousands of lives," Mohamad Zaimi said.

However, he acknowledged that implementing such a policy would be challenging in Malaysia's diverse cultural, religious and socio-economic context.

While the National Fatwa Committee proclaimed in June 1970

that organ and tissue donation is *harus* (permissible) as it saves lives, resistance persists among some Muslims.

Similarly, certain Malaysians of other faiths object to burying or cremating their loved ones with missing organs.

Mohamad Zaimi added that although the policy could theoretically boost organ donations, cultural sensitivities and religious beliefs might hinder its acceptance.

He stressed the importance of a solid healthcare infrastructure, effective public awareness campaigns and clear legal frameworks to ensure the success of the opt-out policy.

While countries such as Spain, Austria and Singapore have successfully implemented opt-out systems, Mohamad Zaimi warned

that such success is not guaranteed in Malaysia due to strong opposition from next of kin.

Spain, for example, leads globally in organ donation, achieving over 40 donors per million population, thanks to a robust opt-out framework and support measures such as organ coordinators.

"The impact of the policy will vary based on each country's healthcare infrastructure and public support," he said, adding that Malaysia has one of the lowest organ donation rates globally, with just 2.3 donors per million population as of 2023.

Cyberjaya University paediatrics professor Dr Zabidi Azhar Mohd Husin highlighted the significant barriers to paediatric kidney transplants, with over 300 children on the waiting list.

"Refusal of parents to be donors is a major obstacle. Peritoneal dialysis is not ideal for children and renal transplants should be prioritised. However, the reluctance of parents to donate is putting the lives of their children at risk," he said.

Zabidi revealed that kidney donors for children are usually motor vehicle incident casualties rather than family members.

He explained that paediatric patients often require transplants due to conditions such as single kidneys, duplicate ureters or duplex kidneys, unlike adults who typically experience chronic renal failure after the age of 50.

He also emphasised the need to address ethical considerations to build public trust, such as protecting individual autonomy and ensuring equitable access to organ transplants.

"The transplantation system in Malaysia faces challenges such as low awareness and public misconceptions, as many Malaysians confuse organ donation with religious prohibitions," he said.

He stressed the importance of collaboration with religious leaders and community organisations as well as the implementation of transparent policies to overcome these barriers.

Additionally, Mohamad Zaimi pointed out that limited infrastructure and a shortage of trained personnel in organ donation and transplantation could also hinder effectiveness of the policy.



**FINAL TOUCH ...** Sarawak Deputy Premier Datuk Amar Dr Sim Kui Hian making the finishing stroke during a symbolic 'Lion Eye-Dotting Ceremony' at the Tua Pek Kong Temple in Kuching yesterday. — BERNAMAPIC

## Johoreans embrace new weekend holiday

**JOHOR BAHRU:** Johoreans are making the most of the newly introduced weekend holiday on Saturdays and Sundays, enjoying recreational activities and exploring local attractions with their families.

One of the main draws has been the Johor Zoo, a popular destination for parents with children.

Some visitors even arrived an hour before the zoo's official opening at 9am to secure a spot.

Nurul Nadira Ismail, 29, a teacher at Sekolah Agama Desa Pulada, said her trip to the zoo with her husband

Muhd Irfan Zekri, 28, had been planned for two weeks.

"We had to plan ahead as my husband, who works in a factory, and I used to have different weekend schedules. My weekend was on Friday and Saturday, while his was on Saturday and Sunday.

"Previously, we had to carefully coordinate our time if we wanted to go anywhere and sometimes one of us would have to take a day off," said Nurul Nadira, who is from Kota Tinggi, when interviewed at the Johor Zoo yesterday.

"Now that we share the same

weekend holiday, it would be much easier for us to plan outings without any restrictions," she added.

Similarly, Daniel Nanang, 36, a supervisor in the oil and gas sector, said the previous mismatch in school weekend holidays often caused disruptions to family plans.

"As someone working in the private sector, my weekends were always on Saturdays and Sundays, but my children's school weekend was on Friday and Saturday," he said.

The change in the official weekend was announced on Oct 7 last year by the Regent of Johor,

Tunku Ismail Sultan Ibrahim, and came into effect on Jan 1.

The decision, made with the consent and blessings of His Majesty the King of Malaysia Sultan Ibrahim, followed consultations with the Johor Islamic Religious Council.

Johor had initially switched its official weekend to Fridays and Saturdays on Jan 1, 2014, with the consent of Sultan Ibrahim.

The only other states currently observing a Friday-Saturday weekend are Terengganu, Kelantan and Kedah. — Bernama

# 'Overconsumption of processed cheese may harm health'

➤ High sodium levels in product linked to hypertension and could increase risk of heart disease: Lecturer

■ BY DEEPAKSHMI MANICKAM  
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**PETALING JAYA:** An academic has warned the public to beware of their consumption of processed cheese as they could be putting their health at risk.

Universiti Teknologi Mara Food Science and Technology Programme senior lecturer Dr Siti Roha Ab Mutalib said processed cheese is known for its convenience but has high sodium levels that are linked to hypertension, and may increase the risk of heart disease and stroke.

"Processed cheese is calorie-dense and overconsumption could contribute to weight gain, raising the likelihood of developing metabolic conditions."

She said while processed cheese provides some calcium and protein, its overall nutritional value often falls short compared with natural cheese.

Malaysians consume processed cheese through various sources, from *goreng pisang* with cheese to mozzarella corn dogs, cheesy instant noodles and cheese *naan*.

"Processed cheese is not as nutrient-dense as natural cheese and overconsumption should be avoided, especially for individuals with existing health concerns."

She said processed cheese is not just a dietary concern but has significant environmental implications as well.

She explained that the production of synthetic additives requires considerable energy while the plastic packaging commonly used for processed cheese slices contributes to pollution.

"The individually wrapped slices may be convenient but they contribute to plastic waste. Chemicals in the plastic wrappers could also migrate into food, especially with dairy products, raising additional health concerns."



Siti Roha said the complex production of processed cheese makes it difficult to trace the origin of its ingredients, and suggested that consumers look for certifications and labels indicating sustainable and ethical sourcing practices. — ADAM AMIR HAMZAH/THE SUN

She said one of the most pressing issues in the cheese market is labelling, with terms such as "cheesy slices" often creating a false impression of natural cheese.

"Consumers need to be vigilant about what they are buying. Labels can be misleading, so it is crucial to read the ingredients list and nutritional information."

She advised looking for products with minimal additives and low sodium content to make healthier choices.

Siti Roha said the complex production of processed cheese makes it difficult to trace the origin of its ingredients, and suggested that consumers look for certifications and labels indicating sustainable and ethical sourcing practices.

"Certifications such as 'organic' or 'grass-fed' could reassure one about the quality of the milk used. Manufacturer transparency is also key. Some brands disclose detailed sourcing information, which helps consumers make informed decisions."

She said for those seeking a healthier and more sustainable option, natural cheese is a

better choice, but one must purchase products made with raw or pasteurised milk that are free of artificial additives.

"Natural cheeses not only offer richer flavours but also retain their nutrient-dense qualities without the need for synthetic additives," she said, calling for greater transparency from manufacturers to help consumers make informed choices.

She said as processed cheese continues to dominate the market, the public should practise moderation and be mindful when purchasing food products at night markets with processed cheese toppings.

"Processed cheese offers convenience but its health and environmental impacts cannot be ignored. Consumers need to balance their choices, opting for natural cheese whenever possible and consuming processed cheese in moderation, if at all."

"The decision lies with the consumer. Armed with knowledge and a commitment to healthier habits, Malaysians could make informed choices that align with their dietary and environmental values."

## S'wak only state to set up one-stop centre for drug abuse

**SIBU:** Sarawak is the only state in the country to set up a one-stop centre (OSC) to address drug abuse, said state National Anti-Drug Agency director Abdul Hamediee Ibrahim.

He said the move has enhanced efforts to address drug addiction in the state.

"When I arrived in Sarawak last year, I noticed a difference compared with other states I had visited. Sarawak stands out in addressing drug addiction with the setting up of the centre."

"The OSC not only addresses drug-related problems but also 14 other social issues that could lead to drug addiction. This makes Sarawak's approach commendable," he said at the Drug Prevention and Rehabilitation Appreciation Night organised by the SibU OSC-MIDS Drug Prevention and Rehabilitation Working Committee here on Saturday.

The Sarawak premier's political secretary Sayed Azmee Wan Junaidi was the guest of honour at the event.

Abdul Hamediee said treating and rehabilitating drug addicts is a challenging process that requires the commitment and cooperation of various parties, including the community.

He said the state agency plans to get 77,000 individuals aged between 15 and 45 registered as Anti-Drug Squad members to bolster efforts in addressing drug addiction.

"The response has been encouraging and 10,000 members have been registered."

He said the issue of drug abuse in Sarawak remains serious and requires immediate action.

He expressed a need for Anti-Drug Squad members and the agency's clients to collaborate with the government in addressing drug problems, paving the way for a drug-free Sarawak. — Bernama

## Pesta Pulau Pinang offers various exciting attractions

**GEORGE TOWN:** The ongoing Pesta Pulau Pinang, which is the state's signature annual festival, is offering an exciting array of attractions for visitors.

Since its inception in 1966, the festival has steadily gained popularity, attracting crowds not just from the local community, but also from domestic and international tourists, all of whom anticipate it as a must-attend event every year.

Marking its 58th edition, this may be the final time the festival is held at Tapak Pesta Sungai Nibong as part of the area is reportedly earmarked for development under the Mutiara Light Rail Transit Line project. However, this is yet to be confirmed.

Event senior manager Refnaldy Azuardi disclosed that this year's festival is running for an extended period of 44 days until Feb 2, aligning with the school holidays to cater to families.

"This allows families to enjoy a variety of attractions, including Euro Fun Park rides, entertainment shows and others." — Bernama

## Tourists warned of fake Malaysia Digital Arrival Card website

**KUALA LUMPUR:** The Immigration Department has urged tourists to remain vigilant against fraudulent websites linked to the registration of the Malaysia Digital Arrival Card (MDAC).

The department revealed one such fraudulent website as [malaysia-arrivalcard.vercel.app](http://malaysia-arrivalcard.vercel.app).

"Visit the official MDAC website at [imigresen-online.imi.gov.my/mdac/main](http://imigresen-online.imi.gov.my/mdac/main) to avoid scams."

Tourists planning to visit Malaysia must complete the MDAC online form before arrival. Exceptions apply to Singaporeans, holders of diplomatic and official passports, permanent

residents, long-term pass holders, General Certificate of Identity holders from Brunei, frequent traveller facility holders between Malaysia and Brunei, Thai border pass holders, and Indonesian cross-border pass holders.

This new policy is intended to streamline immigration processes. — Bernama

## Coffee drinkers may have to adapt to rising prices

**KUALA LUMPUR:** Coffee lovers who are paying more for their favourite specialty brews amid rising coffee bean prices might be forced to adopt more affordable alternatives, such as brewing their own coffee or drinking it less frequently.

The predicament has come about as global coffee prices surged due to unfavourable weather conditions in key coffee-producing nations, such as Brazil and Vietnam.

They are the leading producers of Arabica and Robusta beans, and the coffee brewed from

these renowned beans is enjoyed globally.

Malaysian coffee drinkers would undoubtedly experience the impact of the shortage in the intake and price of their brews.

Private sector employee and coffee enthusiast Luqman Hakim Kamaruzzaman, 29, said he spends between RM120 and RM150 weekly on coffee.

He is managing the rising coffee prices by buying and brewing his own coffee.

Last month, the price of January futures for Robusta coffee reportedly rose above RM24,200

per tonne, a level that has not been seen since the beginning of 2008.

The price of Arabica increased above RM32,120 per tonne, a record last reached in 1977.

The Statistics Department said Malaysia imports most of its coffee beans from Vietnam, Indonesia and Brazil, and the average Malaysian consumed 2.2kg of coffee in 2022, which is a 5.2% increase from 2017.

In response to rising costs, Malaysians would have to adjust their coffee intake habits, with many opting for more affordable alternatives.

Luqman said if the price per cup exceeds RM15, it is considered quite expensive, so he plans to be more selective about choosing the right cafes.

Social media manager Nurul Huda Muhammad Noor, 45, said the rising cost of coffee beans is making her reconsider indulging in her favourite drink as frequently as before.

"I am a coffee lover but now I have reduced it a bit due to health and financial factors. I will definitely reduce my consumption, saving it for special occasions and outings." — Bernama

# Najib's house arrest appeal to be heard today

➤ Court to hear ex-PM's application to adduce additional evidence to support royal addendum existence claim

**KUALA LUMPUR:** The Court of Appeal will hear today Datuk Seri Najib Abdul Razak's appeal against the dismissal of his bid to serve the remainder of his six-year prison sentence under house arrest, based on his claim of the existence of a royal addendum to that effect.

The hearing, which was initially scheduled for Dec 5 last year, will commence at 9am before a three-member bench comprising justices Datuk Azizah Nawawi, Datuk Azhahari Kamal Ramli and Datuk Seri Mohd Firuz Jaffril.

The hearing was postponed to today after Najib's lawyer, Tan Sri Muhammad Shafee Abdullah, informed a three-judge panel that he had filed an application on Dec 3 last year to present additional evidence, *Bernama* reported.

The court will also hear the former premier's application to adduce additional evidence to support his claim of the existence

of such an addendum.

Najib, 71, is appealing the Kuala Lumpur High Court's July 3 decision last year, which dismissed his application for leave to commence a judicial review of a purported addendum issued by the 16th Yang di-Pertuan Agong.

He claims the addendum would permit him to serve the remainder of his prison sentence under house arrest.

High Court Judge Datuk Amarjeet Singh had ruled that the four affidavits supporting Najib's claim, including from Umno president Datuk Seri Dr Ahmad Zahid Hamidi and vice-president Datuk Seri Wan Rosdy Wan Ismail, were hearsay and inadmissible.

Najib is seeking a *mandamus* order to compel the respondents to provide a response and verify the existence of the purported additional decree dated Jan 2 last year.

The respondents are the government, the home minister; the commissioner-general of prisons; the attorney-general; the Pardons Board for the Federal Territories of Kuala Lumpur, Labuan and Putrajaya; the minister in the Prime Minister's Department (Law and Institutional Reform) and director-general of Legal Affairs Division at the Prime Minister's Department.

The former Pekan MP also seeks an order that, if the additional decree is confirmed to exist, the respondents be compelled to enforce it and facilitate his immediate transfer from Kajang Prison to his residence in Kuala Lumpur to serve the remainder of his sentence under house arrest.

Najib is serving a six-year prison sentence after being convicted of misappropriating RM42 million from SRC International Sdn Bhd.

The High Court had sentenced him to 12 years in prison with a fine of RM210 million and the verdict was subsequently upheld by the Court of Appeal and Federal Court. His prison sentence was halved to six years and his fine was reduced to RM50 million following his petition for a royal pardon on Sept 2, 2022.



## NATURE'S FURY ...

The main road in Kampung Tanjung, Bukit Rakit in Terengganu is damaged by the eroding beach caused by pounding waves due to the northeast monsoon.

—BERNAMAPIC

## Homesick Palestinians cause commotion

**KUALA LUMPUR:** The Malaysian Armed Forces (MAF) has confirmed that the commotion involving Palestinians at Wisma Transit Kuala Lumpur (WTKL) on Saturday afternoon stemmed from their wish to expedite their return to Palestine.

MAF, in a statement yesterday, said the 5pm incident was managed effectively with no fights or injuries reported. However, there was some minor damage to the furniture in the facility.

"Upon receiving reports of the incident,

MAF officers and personnel on duty initiated discussions with the Palestinians involved, and the situation was brought under control.

"They dispersed at about 7.30pm," the statement read.

The MAF also urged the public not to speculate about the incident.

Several videos of the commotion at WTKL were widely shared on social media.

A similar incident occurred in October last year, involving Palestinians expressing dissatisfaction over being housed at the transit

centre, and the restrictions on their movement.

Following that, Palestinian Ambassador to Malaysia Walid Abu Ali issued an apology on behalf of Palestinians in Malaysia and their homeland for the disruptions caused.

On Aug 16 last year, Malaysia brought 127 Palestinians, including 41 injured individuals affected by Israeli attacks in the Gaza Strip, to its shores for medical treatment. The injured were treated at Tuanku Mizan Armed Forces Hospital. —Bernama

## Resident suffers burns as fire razes 13 village houses

**SUNGAI PETANI:** A man in his 30s sustained burns on his legs and hands in a fire that engulfed 13 houses in Kampung Keda Tanjung Dawai, Bedong in Kedah yesterday.

Kedah Fire and Rescue Department Senior Fire Superintendent I Azhar Mohamad said they received a distress call at 7.28am, and the

first fire engine arrived at the scene at 7.53am.

"A total of 25 firefighters from the Van Fire and Rescue Station were deployed, assisted by teams from Guar Cempedak, Sungai Petani and nearby volunteer fire brigades.

"Upon arrival, it was confirmed that the fire involved 13 houses, and one man in his 30s

sustained burns on his legs and hands," he said in a statement.

He added that the injured victim was taken to the hospital by medics.

"The fire was brought under control at 8.12am. A fire command post has been activated at Tanjung Dawai," he said. —Bernama

## Thai police nab M'sian in drug bust

**KOTA BHARU:** A Malaysian man was arrested on suspicion of trafficking various types of drugs, with an estimated street value of RM120,000, during a raid on a premises in Sungai Golok, southern Thailand on Dec 30 last year.

Sungai Golok district police chief Colonel Jadsadavit Ingprapan said the 24-year-old suspect is believed to be linked to an international drug smuggling syndicate.

During the raid, authorities seized a total of 1,943 ecstasy pills, 1,510 eramin 5 pills, along with several other types of narcotics found at the premises.

"The suspect will be brought before the Narathiwat Regional Court for temporary detention. His urine sample has been collected for screening at Sungai Golok Hospital," he said.

"Police are investigating the origins of the drugs, and examining the suspect's background for any drug-related offences in Thailand," he said yesterday.

Jadsadavit added that the raid is regarded as one of the largest drug seizures by Thai authorities, following a major bust in early November last year involving six Malaysians, including a female singer, where 6,000 *Yaba* pills were confiscated.

"We will continue to intensify efforts to control and dismantle drug smuggling syndicates operating along the border," he said.

"This seizure underscores the commitment of Thai authorities to combat drug trafficking and ensure security along the borders," he added. —Bernama

## Lorry tyre rim linked to fatal crash found

**ALOR GAJAH:** Police have found an iron rim component believed to be from the detached lorry tyre that caused a five-vehicle crash at Km204 of the North-South Expressway northbound last Dec 23.

Alor Gajah District police chief Supt Ashari Abu Samah said the iron rim was found at the Waste Disposal Centre in Jalan Solok, Tangkak, Johor.

"The iron rim was handed over by a Propel subcontractor to the police and then sent to the Chemistry Department for analysis," he said in a statement yesterday.

Last Dec 23, seven people lost their lives, and 33 others were injured in a crash involving a tour bus carrying 27 passengers, two lorries, a car, and an MPV, at Km204 of the North-South Expressway northbound.

Initial investigations showed that the tour bus hit a detached lorry tyre that was blocking the middle lane, causing the bus to lose control, veered into the opposite lane, and crashed into three other vehicles. —Bernama

## Two fined for misusing company funds

**KUALA LUMPUR:** Two former company directors pleaded guilty to using company funds amounting to RM200,000 as bonus payments for themselves, without the company's approval. They were fined RM100,000 each for the offence.

The Companies Commission of Malaysia (CCM), in a statement yesterday, said Teo Tzi Sin and Wong Poh Wah of Sea Tackle Sdn Bhd, were charged under Section 218(1)(c) of the Companies Act 2016, read with Section 34 of the Penal Code, for abusing their position as company directors for self-benefit.

It said the bonus payment was made together with their salary payment on Jan 30, 2018.

Teo and Wong had initially pleaded not guilty but changed their plea last Dec 13.

Judge Norina Zainol Abidin set Dec 20 to hear the facts of the case and sentencing.

Teo and Wong paid the fine. —Bernama



# Ruinination of Commonwealth Hill

Residents and visitors lament state of desolation at former iconic park in Bukit Jalil

BY HARITH KAMAL  
newsdesk@thesundaily.com

**PETALING JAYA:** The deteriorating condition of Commonwealth Hill at Bukit Jalil in Kuala Lumpur has raised concerns among locals and visitors, who question the lack of maintenance and “disgraceful” state of disrepair.

Commonwealth Hill was developed as part of the Bukit Jalil National Sports Complex, the venue for the 1998 Commonwealth Games. The park is located across the road from the Bukit Jalil National Stadium and is connected to it via a walkway.

Checks by *theSun* found overflowing rubbish bins and litter scattered across pathways, while stagnant water in several areas had become breeding grounds for mosquitoes.

Commemorative structures built to honour the 1998 Commonwealth Games are in a state of disrepair, with broken plaques and monuments, and other structures defaced with graffiti.

Overgrown weeds have overwhelmed much of the park, while several uprooted trees have damaged park benches.

A jogger, who asked to be known

only as Jay, 44, said poor maintenance has been a serious problem even before the Covid-19 pandemic.

“I’ve been coming here for quite some time, and I’ve not seen any improvements. The condition of the park seems to be getting worse with time.

“Despite its poor condition, the park still attracts visitors, mostly locals like myself, because of its easy access. It’s such a shame because the place is close to public transport and easily accessible. It had so much potential, but it’s been left to rot.”

Retiree Chew Thiam Ho, 75, reminisced about the park’s former glory, describing it as one of the best in the area when it first opened.

“I’ve been coming to Commonwealth Hill since it opened to the public in 1998. I live in Sri

Petalang, so it’s very close. I could just walk to the park from my house.

“The park used to be very well-maintained, and facilities were excellent. There were even metal plaques with information about the Commonwealth countries. But now many of them are either broken or have been stolen.

“It used to be so beautiful here with fountains, a pond, well-trimmed trees and neatly maintained bushes.”

On Oct 28, 2015, Malaysian Resources Corporation Berhad (MRCB), through its subsidiary Rukun Juang Sdn Bhd, was appointed by the government to turn the Bukit Jalil National Sports Complex into the Kuala Lumpur Sports City in time for the 2017 Southeast Asian (SEA) Games.

Chew lauded the transformation but questioned why nothing had

been done for Commonwealth Hill. “Kuala Lumpur Sports City has undergone a remarkable transformation, and the surrounding infrastructure is beautiful.

“I don’t understand why nothing has been done for Commonwealth Hill. It looks so out of place and neglected among the regenerated facilities.”

He said the park is an iconic site that commemorates Malaysia hosting the Commonwealth Games, adding that it was a shame to see it in such a “disgraceful and deplorable state.”

*theSun* also noticed signage at the park bearing the name of Malaysia Stadium Corporation (MSC), and reached out to City Hall, MRCB and MSC for clarification and updates about the fate of the park, but did not receive any response at press time.

## Mettle tempered by floods

**PASIR MAS:** Tucked away in a remote corner of Rantau Panjang in Kelantan, Kampung Bendang Perol stands as a powerful symbol of human resilience against the relentless forces of nature.

Fondly referred to as “kampung banjir lambat surut” (village where floodwaters take longer to recede), this settlement has long been synonymous with the tenacity of its residents in dealing with the challenges brought by annual flooding in the area.

While the floodwaters may linger, the spirit of its people flows with unyielding determination, far deeper and stronger than the waters that inundate their land.

According to Mukim Lubok Gong chief Syed Abu Bakar Syed Mat Nor, during such times, villagers must paddle boats through what were once oil palm plantations, transformed into expansive water bodies.

“For the villagers, floods have become a way of life,” he said, adding that they have adapted to what has now become an annual occurrence.

“When the water reaches chest level in the yard, it’s our signal to head to the temporary evacuation centre.”

He said road access to the village could be completely cut off during floods, yet the villagers remain steadfast and undeterred in going about their daily routines.

“This village isn’t just a place. It’s a testament to the unwavering spirit of people who refuse to give up, no matter how many challenges they face.”

Villager Hasan Setapa, 59, said navigating the floods by boat has become second nature to him.

“As soon as the water rises to a certain level, I make it a point to move without delay to avoid any unforeseen incidents,” he said.

“Boats here are more than just a means of transport. They are a lifeline and a symbol of this community’s resilience, showcasing our remarkable ability to adapt amid adversity.”

Houses in Kampung Bendang Perol frequently bear the brunt of river overflows, with water levels often



For the villagers of Kampung Bendang Perol, floods have become a way of life. —BERNAMA FILEPIC

reaching knee-depth and damaging household items.

From furniture and electrical appliances to clothing, the

floodwaters spare little, but the indomitable spirit of the villagers remains unshaken.

The residents do not seek

sympathy, but stand as a powerful testament to the resilience of a small community that rises against the tide, time and again. —Bernama

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## Indian forces clash with Maoist rebels, five dead

**NEW DELHI:** Indian security forces yesterday battled with Maoist rebels in their forested heartland, police said, with at least four guerrillas and one policeman killed.

More than 10,000 people have died in the decades-long insurgency waged by Naxalite rebels, who say they are fighting for the rights of marginalised indigenous people in India's resource-rich central regions.

Government forces stepped up efforts last year to crush the long-running armed conflict, with some 287 rebels killed in 2024, according to government figures.

Clashes broke out on Saturday in the Abujmarh district of Chhattisgarh state, a key battleground in the insurgency.

"Four bodies of Maoists, who were in their battle uniform, have been recovered after an encounter with police forces," said police inspector general P. Sunderraj, adding one police constable had also been killed.

Around 1,000 suspected Naxalites were arrested and 837 surrendered in 2024.

Home Minister Amit Shah warned the Maoist rebels in September to surrender or face an "all-out" assault, saying the government expected to crush the insurgency by early next year.

The insurgency has been drastically restricted in area in recent years.

The Naxalites, named after the district where their armed campaign began in 1967, were inspired by the Chinese revolutionary leader Mao Zedong.

They demanded land, jobs and a share of the region's immense natural resources for local residents, and made inroads in a number of remote communities across India's east and south.

The movement gained strength and numbers until the early 2000s, when New Delhi deployed tens of thousands of security personnel against the rebels in a stretch of territory known as the "Red Corridor".

Authorities have since invested millions of dollars in local infrastructure and social projects to combat the Naxalite appeal. — AFP

# Protesters rally for, against Yoon arrest as deadline nears

## ▶ Court rejects complaints from defence lawyers

**SEOUL:** Thousands braved heavy snow in Seoul yesterday to rally for and against arresting impeached President Yoon Suk Yeol, as South Korea's political crisis appeared headed toward another high-stakes confrontation.

With an arrest warrant against Yoon for alleged insurrection expiring today, groups held demonstrations near his official residence, some urging his immediate arrest and others protesting against it.

Yoon became the country's first sitting president to face arrest over his attempt to declare martial law on Dec 3, which triggered political chaos engulfing Asia's fourth-largest economy and a key US ally.

The conservative president was impeached by parliament and is suspended from official duties while the Constitutional Court decides whether to reinstate or remove him.

On Friday, investigators were blocked from arresting him by Yoon's presidential security service and military troops in a six-hour standoff.

The Seoul Western District Court yesterday rejected a complaint from Yoon's lawyers that the arrest warrant was illegal and invalid, Yonhap news agency reported.

Yoon's lawyers have said the warrant was unconstitutional because the Corruption Investigation Office for High-Ranking Officials (CIO), which leads his criminal investigation, has no authority under South Korean law to investigate any case involving insurrection allegations.

The lawyers said in a statement they would report CIO chief Oh Dong-woon and the investigation

team to prosecutors for what they called illegally executing the warrant, including by mobilising police when the anti-graft body has no authority to do so.

The CIO did not immediately respond to a request for comment.

Seok Dong-hyeon, a lawyer advising Yoon, said: "Judging the legitimacy of any legal interpretation and execution is difficult. If there is an error in the legality of law enforcement against the incumbent president, it will be a big problem."

Some of yesterday's protesters had gathered overnight in downtown Seoul, where temperatures fell below -5°C.

More than 6cm of snow has piled up in parts of the capital, which was under a heavy snow warning.

"We have to re-establish the foundation of our society by punishing the president who has denied the constitution," said Yang Kyung-soo, leader of the Korean

Confederation of Trade Unions (KCTU), a major labour group that took part in the protests.

"We must bring down the criminal Yoon and arrest and detain him as soon as possible."

Nearby, Yoon supporters held placards reading "We will fight for President Yoon Suk Yeol" and "Stop the Steal", a phrase popularised by Donald Trump's supporters after he lost the 2020 election.

Similar rallies drew tens of thousands on Saturday, prompting police to try to disperse KCTU protesters occupying roads and disrupting traffic.

Two were detained and accused of assaulting police officers, Yonhap reported.

On Saturday, the CIO again asked acting President Choi Sang-mok, the finance minister, to order the security service to comply with the arrest warrant.

A Finance Ministry spokesperson declined to comment. — Reuters



**PRIZED BOUNTY ...** The head of a 276kg bluefin tuna was auctioned for ¥207 million (RM5.85 million) in Tokyo yesterday. It was bought jointly by sushi restaurant operator Onodera Group and wholesaler Yamayuk. — REUTERSPIC

## Six killed in bus bomb attack

**QUETTA:** At least six people, including Pakistani paramilitary troops, were killed and scores injured on Saturday in a bombing claimed by separatists in volatile southwestern Balochistan province.

A bus carrying paramilitary troops of the Frontier Corps (FC) was travelling from the port city of Karachi to southwestern Turbat city when it was targeted around 7km west of the city.

"At least six people, including FC soldiers and civilians, were killed in a bomb attack on a bus," said senior police official Rashid-ur-Rehman.

More than 25 were injured in the incident, he added.

A senior security official said it was an apparent suicide attack and the paramilitary troops were targeted.

Balochistan Liberation Army (BLA) spokesperson Jeeyand Baloch said it was a suicide bombing targeting a Pakistani army convoy.

The BLA frequently claims deadly attacks against security forces or Pakistanis from other provinces, notably Punjabis in Balochistan province.

Pakistan has witnessed a dramatic increase in attacks in recent months, particularly in Balochistan and northwestern Khyber Pakhtunkhwa province.

The military reported that 383 soldiers and 925 gunmen were killed in clashes last year.

Security forces have been battling sectarian, ethnic and separatist violence for decades in impoverished Balochistan, which borders Afghanistan and Iran.

Gunmen in the past targeted energy projects with foreign financing, most notably from China, accusing outsiders of exploiting the resource-rich region. — AFP

## Scientist names spider species after Mandopop songs

**BEIJING:** A Chinese scientist has named 16 new spider species after songs by popular "Mandopop" musician Jay Chou.

Mi Xiaodan, a professor at Tongren University in China's southwestern Guizhou province, listed the arachnids in a paper published in the academic journal *Zoological Research: Diversity and Conservation*.

The paper, published last month, has gone viral since being discovered by netizens this year, with a related hashtag on microblogging platform Weibo racking up over 26 million views since Wednesday.

Weibo users have since dubbed Mi, 44, the "Ultimate Fan".

One of the arachnids — the 3.5mm long *Cyclosa xingqing sp. nov.* or "Starry Mood spider" — is named after a hit love song from Chou's debut album *Jay* released in 2000.

Others are named after similarly beloved tunes, including *Rainbow spider*, *Dragon Fist spider* and *Excuse spider*.

Taiwan-born Chou, renowned for his dramatic romance ballads and pop beats, is one of the world's most popular Mandarin-language artists having sold over 30 million records.

The 45-year-old has been a household name on the Chinese mainland and beyond for over two decades.

Now, his songs will be immortalised as the names of the eight-legged critters that Mi and his colleagues recently discovered in China's Yunnan province.

The *Secret Code spider*, a 2.36mm yellowish brown arachnid, is named after Chou's 2002 love song featured on his acclaimed album *The Eight Dimensions*.

It is unclear how the song, in which Chou croons "Don't ever leave, you are missing the missing piece in my world", relates to the spider.

*Excuse spider*, a fuzzy brown and white critter, shares its name with a track from Chou's 2004 album *Common Jasmine Orange*, the best-

selling physical album in China this century, according to Guinness World Records.

Mi, who published the paper with fellow researchers Wang Cheng and Li Shuqiang, has been a Jay Chou fan since his undergraduate days.

"Naming spiders after Jay Chou's songs brings scientific research closer to the public. I hope more people will pay attention to scientific research and support ecological protection," he told Xinhua news agency.

This is not the first time Chou's name has been used for scientific discoveries. In 2011, astronomers in Taiwan named an asteroid after the singer. — AFP

# Storm slams half of US with snow, ice, bitter cold

## ► Missouri, Virginia declare state of emergency

**WASHINGTON:** A powerful winter storm began hammering the central United States on Saturday, with meteorologists warning that millions in the east would face blizzard conditions, treacherous ice, frigid temperatures and severe travel disruptions.

More than 60 million people are in the path of the dangerous storm, which is set to plunge the eastern half of the United States into a deep freeze of Arctic air today.

The National Weather Service (NWS) warned of ferocious weather and severe travel delays, with ice, snow and gale-force winds in states from the central plains to the mid-Atlantic.

Winter storm warnings have been issued from western Kansas clear across to the coastal states of Maryland, Delaware and Virginia, an unusually broad 2,400km swathe under immediate threat.

"Disruptive winter storm to impact the Central Plains to the mid-Atlantic with widespread heavy snow and damaging ice accumulations," the NWS said.

The agency warned that areas from northeastern Kansas to north-central Missouri would see "the heaviest snowfall in a decade".

The first major storm of the year was already wreaking havoc on travel, with Kansas City International Airport announcing closure of its flight operations on Saturday "due to rapid ice accumulation".

Parts of the eastern states of New York and Pennsylvania are facing "heavy lake-effect snow" coming off the Great Lakes that could dump as much as 61cm there, according to the NWS.

Forecast company AccuWeather said the lake-effect snow total in the region, already blanketed in snow this week, could top 1m.

A blizzard across the Central Plains and "whiteout conditions will make travel extremely hazardous, with impassable roads," the NWS said.

Washington could be blanketed in 13cm or

more of snow, with up to 25cm possible in nearby areas.

With the jet stream diving southwards, temperatures are expected to plunge, in some places to below minus 18°C, while strong wind gusts will compound the dangers.

The mercury could sink tens of degrees below seasonal norms down to the US Gulf Coast. Before then, severe thunderstorms are expected across the lower Mississippi Valley, the NWS forecast.

Another major concern is freezing rain and sleet expected from Kansas eastwards to Kentucky and Virginia, setting the stage for thick ice to coat roads, making travel hazardous, bringing down trees and electricity lines, and potentially leaving millions of customers without power.

The NWS warned that it expected widespread tree damage and "long-lasting power outages" from Kansas to the central Appalachian Mountains.

The governors of Missouri and Virginia have declared a state of emergency and took to social media to warn residents to expect hazardous weather. – AFP

## New York starts US\$9 congestion toll

**NEW YORK:** A controversial scheme to charge drivers entering parts of the city was launched yesterday, a first in the United States, putting local authorities on a collision course with President-elect Donald Trump.

State governor Kathy Hochul announced in November that drivers entering areas of Manhattan south of Central Park would pay a daytime toll of US\$9 (RM40).

That plan revives one, originally with a US\$15 base fee, that she paused in June, saying there were "too many unintended consequences for New Yorkers".

Republican lawmakers have called on Trump, a native New Yorker who has vowed to kill the scheme if elected, to intervene now.

Areas neighbouring New York City have argued that a charge would hurt their businesses and impair their residents' ability to commute into Manhattan.

A judge denied an 11th-hour effort on Friday by neighbouring New Jersey state officials to block the scheme on grounds of its environmental impact on nearby areas.

That denial cleared the road for the scheme, which had faced other legal challenges, highlighting the difficulty of charging drivers in a country where the car is king.

The plan is intended to reduce congestion and help fund the New York subway system. Hochul said it was revived after an assessment showed that it would work at a lower fee.

Some elected New York City borough officials as well as a powerful trade group representing haulers fought the project.

Taxi drivers' associations also opposed the plan. Their members will not pay the fee but affected customers will be hit by a surcharge.

The scheme will charge drivers for venturing below 60th Street in Manhattan, an area that encompasses the business districts of Midtown and Wall Street.

Some 700,000 vehicles enter the area every day, and gridlock means cars can travel just 11kph on average, and even slower in some areas, officials say.

There are numerous exemptions to the base fee, as well as a low-income discount plan. In addition, there are discounts for drivers entering the tolling zone more than 10 times a month.

Similar schemes are in use in other megacities including London and Stockholm, but US cities will be watching to see what impact the New York scheme has on traffic and revenues. – AFP



**OUTPOURING OF GRIEF ...** A vigil was held on Saturday for people killed on Bourbon street in New Orleans, where at least 14 revellers died when a man drove a truck into a crowd early on New Year's Day. – AFP/IC

## More records found linking Credit Suisse, Nazi accounts

**WASHINGTON:** An investigation by a Senate panel has found that troubled investment bank Credit Suisse concealed information during previous inquiries into Nazi-controlled bank accounts during World War II.

Documents discovered during an examination have provided new proof of the existence of account holders linked to the Nazis, the Senate Budget Committee said in a statement released on Saturday.

The bank did not reveal the existence of these accounts during previous investigations, notably in the 1990s, the committee said.

Credit Suisse, now a subsidiary of investment bank UBS, agreed in 1998 to take part in a US\$1.25 billion (RM5.62 billion) settlement of lawsuits brought by Holocaust survivors, but it has been accused of not being completely open about its dealings with Nazis.

The Senate committee said on Saturday that one set of newly discovered files, including 3,600 physical documents and 40,000 microfilms, was found to have a "high relevance rate" of Nazi connections.

It said the revelations stem from an interim report by former prosecutor Neil Barofsky, who was fired as an "independent ombudsperson" by the bank in 2022.

Barofsky was reinstated in the role in 2023 "as a result of the Committee's investigation", and after UBS's takeover of Credit Suisse.

In a letter to the panel released on Saturday, Barofsky noted the "extraordinary level of cooperation that Credit Suisse, under the leadership of UBS, has provided" since he rejoined the company.

But he said Credit Suisse had yet to share all the information it held.

The Barofsky team has discovered accounts controlled by high-ranking SS officers, the *Wall Street Journal* reported.

In his letter, Barofsky highlighted "especially noteworthy" discoveries from a Credit Suisse research department.

"Numerous client files in the sample are marked with a stamp stating 'Amerikanische schwarze Liste' – meaning 'American Black List' – a list maintained by the Allies of individuals and companies that were directly financed by, or were known to regularly trade with, Axis powers," he wrote.

"One file bearing this stamp relates to an entity involved in selling looted assets."

UBS said it was committed to providing a complete record of the former Nazi-linked accounts in Credit Suisse's predecessor banks. – AFP

### BRIEFS

#### MAURITIUS FORMER BANK GOVERNOR OUT ON BAIL

**PORT LOUIS:** The former governor of Mauritius' central bank has been released on bail after he was detained and charged with conspiracy to commit fraud. Harvish Seegolam was arrested on Friday, the first major move by the government of Prime Minister Navin Ramgoolam, who has said the previous administration falsified the country's gross domestic product, budget deficit and public debt figures for years. The online edition of the daily *L'Express* reported, without citing sources, that bail fees were set at 500,000 Mauritius rupees (RM47,352). Seegolam's lawyer Ravi Yerrigadoo confirmed his client had been released on bail. – Reuters

#### TWO KILLED IN AUSTRALIA LIGHT PLANE CRASH

**SYDNEY:** Two people have died in a light plane crash off Australia's east coast north of Sydney. Police in New South Wales said on Saturday that emergency services responded to reports of a light plane crash in the ocean near the town of Nambucca Heads, 400km north of Sydney. "The pilot and passenger of the aircraft died at the scene and are yet to be formally identified," NSW Police said. The Australian Broadcasting Corporation reported that the wreckage was found about 1.5km off the coast. – Bernama





Residents and first responders inspect the rubble of a collapsed residential building that was bombed in al-Rimal in central Gaza City on Saturday. — AFP/PPIC

**GAZA:** Israeli military strikes in the Gaza Strip have killed at least 70 people on Friday, Palestinian medics said on Saturday, as mediators launched a new ceasefire push to end the 15-month war.

At least 17 of those who died were killed in airstrikes on two houses in Gaza City, the first of which destroyed the home of the Al-Ghoula family in the early hours, medics and residents said.

"We were woken up by the sound of a huge explosion," said Ahmed Ayyan, a neighbour, adding that 14 or 15 people had been staying in the house.

"Most of them are women and children. They are all civilians, there is no one there who shot missiles, or is from the resistance," Ayyan said.

Residents scoured the rubble for any survivors trapped under the debris and medics said several children were among those killed. A few flames and trails of smoke still rose from burning furniture in the ruins hours after the attack.

The Israeli military said all those "targeted in the strike were involved in terrorist activities, which included exploiting humanitarian aid corridors" and that the strike was carried out at a distance from "aid trucks and did not affect the continued entrance of humanitarian aid".

## 70 killed as new ceasefire talks begin

### ▶ Hamas releases video of female soldier held hostage

Earlier on Saturday, the military said a projectile fired from Gaza fell in the area of the Erez Crossing which "caused damage both to the area of the crossing and next to the humanitarian truck compound".

Another strike on a house in Gaza City killed five people later on Saturday, the Palestinian Civil Emergency Service said, adding that at least 10 others were feared trapped under the rubble.

The Israeli military said earlier its forces had continued their operations this week in Beit Hanoun town in the northern edge of the enclave, where the army has been

operating for three months, and has destroyed a military complex that had been used by Hamas.

At least six other Palestinians were killed in Israeli strikes in Jabalia in the north and near the central town of Deir Al-Balah, medics said.

Saturday's deaths brought the toll to 70 since Friday, said Palestinian health officials.

A renewed push is under way to reach a ceasefire in the war between Israel and Hamas and return Israeli hostages before Donald Trump takes office on Jan 20.

Israeli mediators were dispatched to resume talks in Doha brokered by Qatari and Egyptian mediators, and US President Joe Biden's administration, which is helping broker the talks, urged Hamas on Friday to agree to a deal.

Hamas said it was committed to reaching an agreement as soon as

possible, but it was unclear how close the two sides were.

The armed group released a video on Saturday showing Israeli hostage Liri Albag - who local media said was a soldier - urging Israel to do more to secure the hostages' release. She said their lives were in danger because of Israel's military action in Gaza.

Albag's family said the video had "torn our hearts to pieces".

"This is not the daughter and sister we know. Her severe psychological distress is evident," a family statement said, calling on Israel's government and world leaders not to miss the opportunity to bring all remaining hostages back alive.

The Israeli military offensive has levelled swathes of the enclave, driving most people from their homes and has killed 45,717 Palestinians. — Reuters

## Houthi missile intercepted

**TEL AVIV:** The Israeli military said yesterday it intercepted a missile launched from Yemen, the latest in a series of recent attacks.

"A missile launched from Yemen was intercepted before crossing into Israeli territory," the military said in a statement posted on Telegram.

On Friday, Israel's military said it shot down a missile and a drone launched from Yemen, where rebels have stepped up their attacks since a November ceasefire between Israel and Hezbollah in Lebanon.

While most of the missiles and drones launched from Yemen have been intercepted, one missile wounded 16 people in Tel Aviv last month.

In response, the Israeli air force has struck targets in Yemen, including the international airport in Sanaa.

The Houthi rebels have also been firing at ships in the Red Sea and Gulf of Aden - destabilising a vital shipping lane and prompting reprisal strikes by the United States and sometimes Britain.

The group's Saba news agency and Al-Masirah TV reported "three raids" yesterday east of the city of Saada, attributing the operations to the United States and Britain. — AFP

### BRIEFS

#### EX-GREEK PM SIMITIS DIES, AGED 88

**ATHENS:** Former Greek prime minister Costas Simitis, deemed the "moderniser", died yesterday, aged 88. The government announced four days of mourning for Simitis, who served as prime minister from 1996 to 2004. His leitmotif was "Modernisation has no expiry date. It is an ongoing process, based on the values of democracy, justice and the constant expansion of the individual's potential." Simitis was born in the port city of Piraeus. He studied law and economics in Germany and England. — AFP

#### 10 PALESTINIAN JOURNALISTS KILLED

**RAMALLAH:** Ten Palestinian journalists were killed in the Gaza Strip last month. The Palestinian Journalists Syndicate said eight family members of journalists were killed, three homes of media personnel were destroyed and five reporters suffered severe injuries from shrapnel and gunfire. The syndicate reported that 20 journalists faced detention and were barred from covering events, while seven were imprisoned. — Bernama

## UN accuses Israel of ceasefire breach

**BEIRUT:** The UN peacekeeping force in Lebanon accused Israel on Saturday of a "flagrant violation" of the 2006 Security Council resolution that forms the basis of its November ceasefire with Hezbollah.

The statement from the UN Interim Force in Lebanon (Unifil) came as Hezbollah leader Naim Qassem warned the group's patience with Israeli violations could run out before the end of the 60-day implementation timeframe for the ceasefire.

The fragile truce, which took effect

on Nov 27, has been marked by mutual accusations of violations from both sides.

"This morning, peacekeepers observed an (Israeli military) bulldozer destroying a blue barrel marking the line of withdrawal between Lebanon and Israel in Labbouneh, as well as an observation tower belonging to the Lebanese Armed Forces beside a Unifil position," the peacekeeping force said.

"The (military's) deliberate and direct destruction of both clearly

identifiable Unifil property and infrastructure belonging to the Lebanese Armed Forces is a flagrant violation of Resolution 1701 and international law."

The force, which is represented on the panel overseeing the ceasefire implementation, called on "all actors to avoid any actions, including the destruction of civilian property and infrastructure, that could jeopardise the cessation of hostilities".

Under the terms of the ceasefire, the Lebanese army is to deploy

alongside UN peacekeepers in the south as the Israeli army withdraws over a 60-day period.

Hezbollah is to withdraw its forces north of the Litani River - some 30km from the border - and dismantle any remaining military infrastructure in the south.

In late December, the UN peacekeeping force expressed concern at the "continuing" damage being done by the Israeli military in south Lebanon.

Detailing its latest air strikes in

Lebanon on Thursday, the Israeli military said it was acting to remove any threat to Israel "in accordance with the ceasefire understandings".

Qassem said Hezbollah had decided to show patience, but warned that would not last indefinitely.

"We have said that we are giving an opportunity to prevent Israeli violations and to implement the agreement, and we will exercise patience. This does not mean that we will wait for 60 days," he said. — AFP



LETTERS letters@thesundaily.com

# Private universities should evolve to stay relevant

I REFER to the article "Private universities facing multiple challenges" published in *theSun* on Jan 3, and would like to share my perspectives on some of the issues discussed by National Association of Private Educational Institutions secretary-general Dr Teh Choon Jin.

The opening paragraph of the article, which attributes the growth of private higher education institutions (PHEI) over the years to the quota system and limited seats in public universities, provides a glimpse into why PHEI are struggling.

Let us contrast this with the international schools market segment, which has also seen exponential growth over the past decade. These schools offer globally recognised programmes such as the International General Certificate of Secondary Education and International Baccalaureate, to name a few.

When questions arise about the standard of our public schools, the programmes offered by international schools present a compelling alternative. Unfortunately, the same cannot be said for many of the programmes offered by PHEI.

As someone who has been involved in various leadership capacities within the higher education sector over the past 15 years, it is notable how the majority of PHEI have struggled with their enrolment figures, especially post-pandemic.

Multiple researches have found Gen Zs to be defined by strong individuality and entrepreneurial traits. They are vocal about the values they believe in and are passionate about building their personal brand. Unfortunately for PHEI, "running your own business" is something that does not require a paper qualification, and most PHEI are not in a position to offer anything beyond that.

Completing a diploma or degree was once seen as a measure of one's resilience. However, with the rising cost of living, there are now numerous alternative pathways to gaining the skills needed for securing a job and earning an income - without spending



A recent report highlights concerns from industry stakeholders about the skills gaps in jobseekers, citing the lack of relevance in tertiary education programmes.  
- AMIRUL SYAFIQ/THE SUN

several years and tens of thousands of ringgit.

*"Whilst all PHEI are happy to boast about their graduate employability statistics, there have always been concerns as to the credibility of the metrics being measured, particularly when every institution is getting a 'Gold' or 'Five-star' rating."*

Furthermore, the number of PHEI that have successfully (i.e. profitably) implemented online or hybrid programmes, as well as micro-credentials, are still few and far between as learners opt for more affordable or free courses via massive open online course (MOOC) providers.

A combination of courses offered by world-renowned universities or industry giants would easily convince prospective employers of an individual's capabilities. In fact, entire degree programmes can now be completed on MOOC platforms at a significantly reduced cost.

Gen Zs are also tech-centric, and most PHEI have failed to catch up. Some have been agile, offering qualifications in niche yet rapidly emerging areas such as drones, electric vehicles and blockchain. However, they remain a small minority.

This is evidenced in the Malaysia Critical Occupations List published annually by TalentCorp to highlight roles that are experiencing a talent shortage.

In the most recent edition of this report, industry stakeholders continued to voice their concerns regarding the skills gaps in

jobseekers, caused by a lack of relevance in tertiary education programmes.

Whilst all PHEI are happy to boast about their graduate employability statistics, there have always been concerns as to the credibility of the metrics being measured, particularly when every institution is getting a "Gold" or "Five-star" rating.

The general consensus seems to be that although the vast majority of graduates do secure jobs, a large percentage end up in roles with unsatisfactory salaries and/or are unrelated to their field of study.

Additionally, a review of university rankings such as those by QS or Times Higher Education, which I understand are skewed towards research, shows public universities still dominating the list. This is another area in which PHEI need to accelerate their efforts.

Whilst there is room for a more efficient accreditation process by the Malaysian Qualifications Agency, I would question Teh's request for the authorities to "help PHEI innovate".

For the many PHEI still stuck in their outdated ways, I believe it is incumbent upon themselves to take the necessary steps for advancement, which are obvious and have long been called for by the Higher Education Ministry, the industry and learners.

In conclusion, I am wholeheartedly against PHEI being financially aided by the government. Any PHEI facing concerns about their sustainability as a business should instead be performing a thorough self-examination. As the adage goes, "adapt or die".

John Lim

# Act now to alleviate traffic congestion

I AM disappointed with the government's lack of political will to improve the public bus system and make it the main transport option for Malaysians.

It is 2025, and our leaders are still dragging their feet on properly resolving this systemic problem that is burdening the people.

Traffic congestion is getting worse. The reasons are simple: people are not confident to rely on public buses and do not find it as convenient as their cars. Hence, it is the government's responsibility to change people's mindset by making the public bus system more appealing.

The government should:

- Provide more public buses (preferably powered by electricity or hydrogen gas).
- Increase the frequency of public bus services in towns and cities.
- Improve the quality of public bus services such as cleanliness, punctuality, etc.
- Increase parking charges to encourage more people to use public buses instead of cars.

The obvious solution is the provision of more eco-friendly buses so the public feels more confident to use them instead of their own vehicles. Do not only focus on rail and train services, which are not as relevant for most Malaysian cities.

This longstanding traffic congestion problem begs the question: Why is the government slow in improving public bus services and providing more buses?

Is it for the benefit of highway toll concessionaires? By ensuring a high volume of cars on the road, these concessionaires can acquire greater profits.

Why does it take the government so long to effectively resolve traffic congestion issues? Furthermore, there are many other serious systemic problems plaguing our society, such as low wages, high cost of living, expensive healthcare, expensive tertiary education, unaffordable housing and others.

If the main reason is due to insufficient funds, develop the political will to:

- Work with our Asean neighbours to collectively raise corporate taxes.
- Cut the high salaries and financial benefits of MPs, ministers and other high-ranking government officials and redirect the money to government coffers.
- Allocate existing funds towards addressing serious, systemic problems like this, instead of development and commercial projects.

Our leaders should have a strong political will to solve our society's many systemic problems.

Raveen Veerasenan Jayakumar Ipoh

# EDUCATION

## FOCUS 2025

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# Meeting the late president Carter

## COMMENT

By M. Krishnamoorthy

**F**ORMER US president Jimmy Carter, who died after celebrating his 100th birthday in October last year, had a lasting impact on many. On Oct 9, 1982, I had the privilege of organising and chairing a meeting with Carter. However, as president of the International Students Association at the University of Tennessee, Knoxville, I was initially told by university authorities that my proposal to arrange the meeting was nearly impossible.

Today, my book *Change My Thoughts: Making the Impossible Possible* (pic), soon to be published, traces the challenges I faced in organising this historic meeting with Carter.

As a student in the United States in 1982, and now a retired associate/adjunct professor and freelance journalist, I faced an uphill task as a student leader. Despite the rejection of my proposal to arrange a meeting with Carter, I remained determined to pursue my goal, driven by unwavering perseverance and resolve.

Amidst numerous hurdles, I turned obstacles into opportunities, ultimately securing a meeting with Carter.

As Audrey Hepburn famously said, "Nothing is impossible, the word itself says 'I'm possible'", and I truly believe in this.

Fast forward to Oct 9, 1982 – the day I had the honour of organising and chairing a meeting with student leaders and Carter. It is a date forever etched in my mind, one that significantly altered the trajectory of my life.

As I stood in the World Fair president's room, I felt the air thicken with anticipation. I could not help but marvel at the journey that had brought me here – a young Malaysian student about to meet one of the most influential figures in modern history, a US president.

The ornate decorative clock on the wall ticked relentlessly towards 10.25am. Each second felt like an eternity, yet paradoxically, time seemed to rush forward.

Suddenly, the heavy oak doors swung open and the room fell into a hushed silence. Bo Roberts, the fair's president, entered first. His usual jovial demeanour was tinged with an air of reverence as he ushered in two figures who brought a distinct energy into the room.

Carter and his wife Rosalynn moved with a grace that spoke of years in the public eye, yet retained a down-to-earth quality that immediately set everyone at ease.

### Fascination for Malaysia

Carter's lean frame belied the strength of his presence. His clear, piercing blue eyes scanned the room before settling on me. In that moment, I felt truly seen in a way I had never experienced before.

Rosalynn, elegant and poised, stood by his side, her gentle smile perfectly complementing her husband's focused gaze.

Roberts enthused and paced forward towards me and Carter – a moment I was eagerly waiting for – and made the introduction: "Mr President, meet Krishna."

"I've been looking forward to meeting you," Carter said, his voice carrying the soft accent of his Georgia upbringing. His grip was firm and reassuring, the handshake of a man who had brokered peace deals and navigated global crises.

"Where are you from?"

I took a deep breath, steadying myself to mask my nervousness, and replied: "Malaysia, Sir. It is an honour to meet you, Mr President."

A spark of interest lit up his eyes. "Malaysia. A beautiful country at the crossroads of Asia. I've always been fascinated by its diverse culture and rapid development."

As I escorted them to the conference room, my mind raced. This man, who had shaped world events from the Oval Office just a year ago, was now walking beside me, genuinely interested in my home country, Malaysia. The surreal nature of the moment was not lost on me.

The boardroom was a sea of eager faces – student leaders from various backgrounds, all united in their excitement to meet the president.

As we entered the boardroom, a wave of applause welcomed us. Carter raised his hand in acknowledgement, his smile warm and genuine. The room erupted loudly in applause, a tidal wave of sound that threatened to overwhelm me. But as Carter extended his hand again, the noise faded away and the world narrowed to this single point of contact.

As he took his seat at the head of the table, he surprised me once again. "Krishna," he said, gesturing to the chair beside him, "come sit next to me. I'd like to hear more about your experiences as a student leader." Overwhelmed by his graciousness, I complied.

The weight of responsibility settled on my shoulders as I realised I was not just representing myself, but my country and all the student leaders present.

"Thank you, Mr President, for this incredible honour," I began, my voice growing stronger with each word. "When we first dreamed of meeting you, we never imagined you would choose to visit us during your trip to the World's Fair. Your presence here today speaks volumes about your commitment to nurturing future leaders."

As I outlined the purpose of our meeting – to inspire leadership, honour Mr Carter and foster interaction among diverse student groups – I saw heads nodding in agreement around the table.

However, it was the intense focus in Carter's eyes that truly drove home the significance of this moment.

### Pinnacle of global leadership

Carter helmed the world's most powerful nation from 1977 until January 1981. Here was a man who had stood at the pinnacle of global leadership, now sitting among a group of aspiring young leaders, ready to share his wisdom and experiences.

With a friendly and instantly infectious smile, Carter said, "Krishna, I'm happy to be here. I appreciate the honour of visiting the people from the University of Tennessee and student leaders from throughout the world."

Carter was careful, rational and precise in his remarks; he spoke with earnestness and moral assurance while gesturing for emphasis.

"I kind of like the life now. I do not have the daily responsibilities of the White House, but I still have many of the privileges that come with being a former president. And one of the great things I have is the chance to travel around the country and other nations, meet interesting people and share views."

"I will be working with Emory University, dealing with the problems faced by our country and the rest of the world. We plan to undertake major projects that we believe cannot be done elsewhere, and I hope to establish a centre over time. It will be a 'senate' to resolve crises and disputes for the people who have serious arguments or differences in their country or between nations."

"They can come to my private centre in Atlanta and, with a trusted mediator, try to resolve difficulties, disputes between them and perhaps avoid a war," he said.

"At Emory University," he added, "I will be teaching international affairs law, political science and theology."

"One of the questions we address in theology that you may be interested to know is how the world religions impact the world and human events. Some of the great achievements of world history were because of religious beliefs."

"Almost all the religions you know, Hinduism, Islam, Buddhism or Christianity, have a basic premise: understanding, communication, brotherhood, love and peace. The question of why everybody wants peace but cannot seem to get it should be addressed by the greatest thinkers of our time," Carter stated.

The discussion shifted to the state of the US economy when I asked: "Has Reaganomics solved the country's economic problems?"

### Human and civil rights policies

"When I left office," Carter said, "there wasn't a

high school graduate who was academically qualified who couldn't get a college education through loans, grants or scholarships. All that has been taken away. The best investment is in people or human resources. We have gone backward in providing services to our people."

"It has been a great failure and a tragedy for our country. Under president (Ronald) Reagan, the nation's deficit will exceed all the peacetime (deficits) ever served in this country in 200 years," he said.

Carter had an uncanny ability to crystallise issues by distilling them to their essence. Although Carter said he generally approved of Reagan's stand on the Middle East, he found fault with Reagan's handling of other international affairs, including incidents in Africa, Latin America and the Falkland Islands.

Carter also criticised Reagan's cutbacks in aid to the poor as well as his approach toward soaring unemployment rates. He also pointed out that Reagan had not pursued human and civil rights policies.

"Other than that," he chuckled, "I think he's done a pretty good job."

### What does it take to be a president?

To another question by an American student leader, "What does it take to be a president?", he replied: "A little more than an ordinary man. Anybody who says he is qualified must have a lot of ego, ambition, self-confidence, honesty, integrity and tenacity."

His approach was crucial in steering the US to overcome the complex and nearly impossible challenges of creating a sound economic nation. His systematic, unhurried and logical approach was partly developed by his training as a top-class engineer.

Reflecting on his four years as president, Carter said: "All difficult decisions are made in an element of loneliness, a loneliness that requires a certain amount of courage in the final analysis."

As the meeting ended, Carter called his wife to the forefront and remarked: "She is my greatest political adviser, and she could have answered all those questions better than I did."

On that note, I profusely thanked him again and led him out as the presidential security escorted him to the World's Fair national pavilions.

That night, the stars appeared more dazzling than ever. Slowly, I began to see a pattern forming in the dark night. As I lay on my bed in the dormitory, I reflected as my heart listened intently and as my mind mused: "What an achievement for students, the university and myself as a person who organised and chaired the historic and unprecedented meeting."

**Krishnamoorthy is a media coach, adjunct professor and undercover journalist.**

With decades of experience, he has contributed to major news outlets like *Bernama*, *NST* and *Malaysiakini*. He also collaborates with international networks like *CNN* and the *BBC*.

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## Ensuring online safety in schools

### LETTERS

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**ADVANCING** technology, such as smartphones and gadgets, offers significant benefits to education, making it easier to access information quickly through tools like Google, compared with traditional methods like library card catalogues.

However, like most new technologies, gadgets can also create problems if not properly managed in schools. Fortunately, Malaysia's Education Ministry has re-endorsed the 2018 policy that bans or restricts the use of smartphones and gadgets in classrooms, providing relief to stakeholders.

Handphones and gadgets have become a

global concern in today's classrooms, sparking lively debates among parents, educators and government officials. As a result, various regulatory practices have emerged, with many deeming the ban of these devices necessary.

Secretary-general of Malaysia's National Union of the Teaching Profession Fouzi Singon agrees that the risks of compromising students' education outweigh the benefits of using gadgets.

"Even with the ban in place, we still have incidents of misuse – filming of bullying incidents and other inappropriate cases."

He went on to say that currently, only select schools are allowed to use tablets in classrooms, and only for specific subjects.

Also supporting the ban is president of the Malaysian Cyber Consumer Association Siraj Jalil, who stated that allowing handphones in schools

would foster an unhealthy culture of cyberbullying and the filming of inappropriate videos. This, he argues, would undermine the primary purpose of education and create additional challenges for students and teachers.

The primary aim of such regulations is to protect students' well-being and ensure a distraction-free learning environment.

With the rise of online harassment and verbal abuse on social media, even Olympic gold medalists are targeted. These harmful influences not only disrupt students' concentration but also hinder their ability to engage effectively with their academic work and peers.

Form Six student Farihatul Ilikma Ibrahim confirmed that the ban promotes face-to-face communication and improves social skills.

Additionally, it reduces the likelihood of cheating during exams. In emergencies,

students can use school phones or seek help from a teacher, according to officials.

Educators and counsellors recommend reducing screen time for students by encouraging outdoor activities, sports and family outings.

Additionally, Unesco's "Put Learners First" programme advocates for a global ban on cellphones in classrooms. Unesco's recommendation for a global ban on cellphones in classrooms is based on its analysis of global education systems, which found that one in four countries have already implemented such bans.

Research indicates that these bans have helped reduce classroom disruption, improve learning quality and protect from cyberbullying.

**C. Sathasivam Sitheravellu**  
Seremban

# Interim steps to cushion premium repricing impact

➤ LIAM, Malaysian Takaful Association and PIAM in joint move to ease financial burden on policyholders, participants

**KUALA LUMPUR:** The Life Insurance Association of Malaysia (LIAM), the Malaysian Takaful Association (MTA) and Persatuan Insurans Am Malaysia (PIAM) have announced interim measures to support policyholders and participants impacted by the recent premium and contribution repricing.

These measures are aimed at easing the financial burden on policyholders/participants so that they can continue to be covered by medical and health insurance or takaful (MHIT).

In a statement, they said the industry recognises the sensitivity of the situation and remains committed to assisting policyholders and participants during this transition. The interim measures are:

➤ **Spreading out future premium/contribution increases arising from repricing due to medical claims inflation.**

Insurers and takaful operators (ITO) will spread out the changes in premiums arising from medical claims inflation over a minimum of three years. This measure will remain in place until the end of 2026. With this measure, at least 80% of policyholders and participants are expected to experience yearly premium adjustments due to medical claims inflation of less than 10%.

➤ **Special provisions for those 60 years old and above who are covered under the minimum plan.**

One-year pause in premium and contribution adjustment arising from medical claims inflation for those aged 60 and above, who are covered under the minimum plan within the MHIT products that they purchased. This pause will be effected for one year from their policy anniversary.

Policyholders and participants are advised to check with their insurer or takaful operator on details of their MHIT plan. The two interim measures above are not applicable to premium increases that may apply when a policyholder moves to a higher age band. This will be managed by the insurer or takaful operator.



Affected policyholders are strongly urged not to terminate their policies. – BERNAMAPIC

➤ **Policy and certificate reinstatement options for surrendered or lapsed policies and certificates in 2024.**

Policyholders and participants who have surrendered or lapsed their policies/certificates due to medical repricing in 2024 will be eligible for reinstatement without additional underwriting requirements.

➤ **Alternative MHIT products.**

To supplement the interim measures, ITO will offer appropriate alternative MHIT products at the same or lower premiums for policyholders who do not wish to continue their existing MHIT plans that have been repriced. ITO that do not currently offer appropriate alternative products must make these products available to policyholders by the end of 2025.

LIAM, MTA and PIAM said the interim measures will provide some support to policyholders and participants while systematic and structural changes are being pursued across the healthcare ecosystem. It is critical that a “whole-of-nation” approach is implemented to address the rising costs of medical care, and they expect strong participation from hospital providers and doctors, with support from the Ministry of Health (MOH). This includes bringing down pharmaceutical costs by higher usage of generic drugs, over utilisation of diagnostic tests, price transparency and implementation of Diagnosis-Related Group initiatives.

These efforts must be expedited to ensure the sustainability of the healthcare ecosystem and equitable access to affordable healthcare for all.

Additionally, they said, the interim measures are unsustainable in the long term

as they come at a significant cost to ITO which have to bear the associated financial loss in the meantime.

The joint statement said, “We understand the challenges our policyholders/participants may face during this transition, and these interim measures reflect our unwavering commitment to their financial well-being. These efforts aim to balance the immediate needs of our policyholders/participants with the long-term sustainability of their coverage. The industry also emphasises the importance of maintaining financial security and sustaining benefits for all policyholders/participants.”

All insurers and takaful operators have established dedicated hotlines to assist affected policyholders and participants.

Meanwhile, the Malaysian Financial Planning Council is strongly urging affected insurance policyholders not to terminate their policies due to premium adjustments after Bank Negara Malaysia introduced interim measures to regulate MHIT premiums on Dec 20.

MFPC president Andy Ng Yen Heng said policyholders should fully utilise the measures and prioritise maintaining their insurance coverage, stressing that insurance protection is the cornerstone of financial planning.

“Losing coverage could leave individuals financially vulnerable during unforeseen circumstances, and public healthcare, while an alternative, may pose challenges such as longer waiting times or limited access to preferred treatments,” he told Bernama recently.

Ng encouraged those with terminated or lapsed policies to reinstate their coverage promptly under the new measures and urged individuals to review their financial plans to accommodate premium adjustments.

## IFC, group commit US\$900m financing for Yondr's data centre in Malaysia

**PETALING JAYA:** International Finance Corporation (IFC), the largest global development institution focused on the private sector in emerging markets and a member of the World Bank Group, and a consortium of six international financial institutions have committed over US\$900 million (RM4 billion) in financing to global data centre operator Yondr Group's hyperscale data-centre campus in Malaysia.

DBS, Deutsche Bank, Global Infrastructure Partners (a part of BlackRock), HSBC, ING and Natixis CIB joined IFC in the latest round of financing for the 98MW project in Johor Bahru, which is the first phase of a 72.5-acre data centre campus that is set to deliver 300MW of critical IT capacity when completed. The project is set to become one of the largest and most technologically advanced data centers in Asia Pacific, supporting rapidly growing demand for data processing capacity in the region.

IFC announced a financing package of up to US\$150 million for Yondr's Malaysia project in May 2024, comprising an initial US\$50 million bridge loan that played a crucial role in advancing the project and attracting the six international financial institutions into this most recent financing round. IFC has now committed its second tranche of financing of US\$100 million alongside financing from the other lenders.

“Our Johor campus is a landmark development for Yondr and will become an important part of Asia's infrastructure as demand for capacity continues to grow in the region, driven by the acceleration of artificial intelligence and digital services,” said Chester Reid, chief financial officer at Yondr.

“Our success in securing a substantial loan facility to help complete the first phase of this campus highlights trust in the Yondr brand from leading financial institutions, following a number of major project milestones we have delivered this year in Europe and North America.” The campus will be certified by the Excellence in Design for Greater Efficiencies green building programme, IFC's green building certification system focused on making buildings more resource efficient.

“We're delighted to commit this second tranche of our financing for Yondr's data-centre campus in Malaysia,” said Judith Green, the World Bank Group's country manager for Malaysia.

“This project will not only help to accelerate the digital transformation of the wider Asia-Pacific region, but also serves as a strong example of how IFC's tailored financing solutions can de-risk projects and drive private-sector investment into emerging markets.”

## Bank Islam surpasses RM4 billion in green financing, well ahead of its 2025 target

**KUALA LUMPUR:** Bank Islam Malaysia Bhd achieved a significant milestone by surpassing its initial target of RM4 billion in green financing, achieving RM4.8 billion in September 2024, well ahead of its 2025 goal.

The bank said this achievement highlighted its key role in advancing Malaysia's green economy.

“Building on this success, Bank Islam has set an ambitious target to grow its sustainable finance portfolio to RM28 billion by the end of 2025,” the bank said in a recent statement.

As a leader in syariah-compliant sustainable finance, the bank is committed to accelerating Malaysia's green economy while generating lasting value for businesses, communities, and the environment.

Bank Islam highlighted the Ihsan Sustainability Investment Account, launched in 2023, as central to its sustainability strategy, focusing on investments aligned with the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals and Bank Negara Malaysia's Climate Change and Principle-Based Taxonomy.

The bank also supports Malaysia's clean energy transition by facilitating renewable energy projects such as solar and hydropower, contributing to the National Energy Transition Roadmap and its net-zero emissions target by 2050.

Bank Islam's green finance initiatives promote environmental sustainability and drive inclusive economic growth by creating jobs and supporting micro, small, and medium-sized enterprises, agribusinesses and underserved communities while boosting rural



development and promoting economic resilience.

Its group CEO, Datuk Mohd Muazzam Mohamed, said the bank's commitment to green finance goes beyond regulatory compliance, aiming to create positive change that will shape Malaysia's economy for generations.

“By focusing on sustainable

financing solutions, we are not just supporting industries essential to Malaysia's future, such as renewable energy and manufacturing, but also ensuring we protect the environment for future generations,” he said.

Further reinforcing its commitment to sustainability, Bank Islam recently became the first bank in Malaysia to certify 86 Certified Green Finance Advisors through a comprehensive training programme developed in collaboration with Asian Banking School. – Bernama



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## Ringgit set to trade between RM4.20 and RM4.40 in Q1'25: Economist

**PETALING JAYA:** The ringgit is expected to remain range-bound between RM4.20 and RM4.40 in the first quarter of 2025 on investor sentiment, global monetary policies and domestic economic developments.

Independent market economist Dr Suresh Rama said the US Federal Reserve's measured pace of interest rate cuts is likely to keep the US dollar supported.

"However, given that Bank Negara Malaysia is expected to maintain its interest rates for much of 2025, the ringgit will remain within the RM4.20 to RM4.40 range in the first quarter," he told *SunBiz*.

Suresh highlighted that Malaysia's economic performance will be robust this year, with growth likely to reach the upper end of the 5.5% to 6.0% range, driven by major infrastructure projects in rail and road development that are fuelling both public and private investments.

"Private consumption will remain steady, but there is a risk of reduced oil subsidies and likely electricity tariff hikes, which could temper spending."

Kenanga Investment Bank expects the ringgit to end 2025 at RM4.45, drawing attention to the Malaysian stock market and projecting Bursa Malaysia's benchmark index at 1,840 points.

"The first quarter will involve a wait-and-see approach, as a cautious Asean stock market reflects uncertainties around tariff threats and higher US policy rate expectations. These conditions resemble 2018, but Malaysia is better positioned this time with stronger fundamentals and structural themes providing relative insulation," it said.

Public Investment Bank predicts the ringgit will average between RM4.45 and RM4.55 throughout 2025, with Bursa's benchmark index ending the year at 1,700 points.

It said, "While the US dollar is unlikely to be replaced as the world's reserve currency anytime soon, its dominance has declined from 70% in 2001 to 58% currently. Elevated bond yields suggest a stronger US dollar, which would result in a weaker ringgit in 2025." - by **HAYATUN RAZAK**

## Spritzer out to make a splash in international markets

■ BY **HAYATUN RAZAK**  
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**PETALING JAYA:** Spritzer Bhd, Malaysia's largest bottled water producer, is eyeing growth in international markets, and is focusing on key markets such as China, the United Kingdom and the Netherlands to drive future growth.

"We are actively taking steps to grow our online sales channel - through e-commerce platforms such as Shopee, Lazada, and TikTok - and to grow our footprint in key international markets as far as possible," Spritzer told *SunBiz* via email.

As of end 2023, its export sales made up less than 10% of the group's revenue.

"We have a wholly owned trading company operating in Guangzhou, China, which in April 2016 started the sale and wholesale distribution of bottled water products in Guangzhou and other parts of China.

"We also export our mineral water products under the brand name ACILIS by Spritzer to the United Kingdom and Netherlands," it shared.

Spritzer said, it is taking prudent measures to monitor and manage the higher input and operating costs which are primarily in Malaysia. "We will focus on sustaining our sales revenue and to safeguard our market share in the bottled water industry."

For the third quarter ended Sept 30, 2024 (Q3'24), Spritzer recorded a net profit of RM17.12 million, up 0.9% from RM16.97 million in the same period a year earlier. Revenue

### ▶ Malaysian bottled water producer focusing on China, the United Kingdom and the Netherlands

for Q3'24 stood at RM145.97 million, an increase of 10.12% from RM132.56 million in the corresponding period last year, driven by a 10% rise in the manufacturing segment and a 19% growth in the trading segment.

For the cumulative nine months, net profit was RM52.4 million, marking a 16.9% increase from RM44.47 million in the same period last year. Revenue rose to RM427.53 million, up 16.92% from RM365.67 million year-on-year.

The increase in the group's sales revenue in the third quarter and year-to-date ended Sept 30, 2024 is due to the increase in sales volume of bottled water from the manufacturing segment.

The trading segment's quarterly and year-to-date revenue increased mainly due to higher sales volume.

On sustainability, Spritzer said it aims to become a circular economy-driven brand by 2030 by leveraging cutting-edge technology to introduce sustainable solutions that align with evolving consumer needs.

The brand said its approach is focused on sourcing raw materials sustainably and ethically as well as minimising carbon footprint.

"We source our mineral water from an over 400-acre protected rainforest landbank in Taiping, Perak, ensuring we produce high-quality water products rich with

natural minerals including silicone dioxide, or better known as silica," it said.

In 2023, Spritzer introduced label-free, 100% recyclable bottles for its silica-rich natural mineral water.

"By eliminating labels, Spritzer reduces the use of paper and plastic materials, contributing to the preservation of forests and mitigating the impact of plastic waste on our planet," it explained.

Beyond the immediate benefits of waste reduction, Spritzer said its label-free bottles also play a vital role in simplifying the recycling process. "The absence of labels streamlines the recycling chain, making it more efficient and cost-effective," it added.

Spritzer's polyethylene terephthalate bottles are 100% recyclable, and the company said it continues to introduce sustainable packaging alternatives for its bottled water products.

"Up to 30% sustainable and recycled plastics are used in our packaging. By redesigning packaging to use less virgin material and incorporating eco-friendly design principles, we have managed to lower the amount of plastic used in production, resulting in lighter bottles that require fewer natural resources to produce and transport," it said.

The company said this not only minimises waste from the outset but also reduces the energy

intensity and emissions associated with manufacturing and distribution processes, aligning with global efforts to curtail resource depletion and carbon footprint.

Spritzer said it recognises the escalating issue of consumer packaging waste in Malaysia. Therefore, it has joined forces with other industry leaders in Malaysian Recycling Alliance, which was established in January 2021, as part of its sustainability commitment. "This alliance marks a step in our journey towards sustainable waste management, focusing on enhancing recycling rates, promoting the use of recycled materials, and preventing environmental leakage of post-consumer packaging."

In December 2024, Spritzer won the "Brand of the Year" award in the water category for the national beverages segment at the World Branding Awards 2024-2025 organised by the World Branding Forum, a global non-profit organisation dedicated to elevating branding standards worldwide.

It was Spritzer's tenth consecutive victory at the awards series, underscoring its excellence in quality, branding, and consumer trust, establishing itself as Malaysia's leading mineral water brand. The event honours both global and national brands based on an evaluation process that includes brand assessment, market research, and online public voting, with 70% of the evaluation relying on consumer votes.

Head of public relations Winnie Chin, who received the award on behalf of the company at a grand ceremony held at the Tower of London, said Spritzer is truly honoured to receive the recognition for the tenth year running.

## EXAL to redraw M'sian real estate landscape with green housing, smart cities

■ BY **AIMIE SHAZRIE**  
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**PETALING JAYA:** EXAL Group is spearheading a transformative shift in Malaysia's real estate landscape with its commitment to sustainable housing and smart city integration.

Managing director Albert Ko said the group is actively contributing to the Kuching Smart City Master Plan through its flagship project, SOL Estate.

"EXAL's mission is to create living spaces that are not only environmentally responsible but also people-focused."

"With SOL Estate, we're taking a major step forward in shaping the future of housing in Malaysia, blending sustainability with innovation to support smarter urban living," he told *SunBiz*.

He said SOL Estate embodies EXAL's commitment to sustainability through low-carbon construction methods, modular designs, and eco-friendly building materials.

"These features reduce waste and energy consumption during construction while allowing for customisable living spaces that meet diverse family needs. Our modular housing approach not only minimises environmental impact but also allows us to deliver homes faster and more efficiently. This is particularly appealing to environmentally-conscious homeowners and investors."

Aligned with the Kuching Smart City Master Plan, Ko said, SOL Estate integrates sustainable urban planning with technology-driven solutions. "The project focuses on creating

community-centric neighbourhoods with features like shared green spaces, renewable energy solutions and smart infrastructure for energy and water management.

"Smart cities are about improving quality of life through sustainable practices and advanced technologies. With SOL Estate, we are not just building homes, we are creating intelligent ecosystems where people and nature coexist harmoniously," he said.

Ko added that EXAL leverages cutting-edge green technologies to enhance sustainability and efficiency in its developments. The SOL Estate features integrated renewable energy systems such as solar panels and energy-efficient building materials that reduce reliance on non-

renewable resources.

"Smart water management systems and rainwater harvesting technology are utilised to conserve water, while passive cooling designs reduce energy needs for air conditioning. Our use of green technology ensures that SOL Estate is not only eco-friendly but also offers long-term cost savings for residents. It is a practical demonstration of how modern technology can support sustainable urban living," he said.

On attracting sustainable investments, Ko said EXAL is tapping into the growing demand for environmental, social and governance-compliant and syariah-compliant investments in real estate.

"Our innovative housing projects offer attractive opportunities for

investors seeking both financial returns and long-term environmental impact. Investors today are increasingly focused on sustainability. Our developments align perfectly with these priorities, making EXAL an ideal partner for green investment opportunities," he added.

Looking ahead, Ko said EXAL plans to expand its green housing concept to other regions in Malaysia. By doing so, the group aims to support nationwide efforts to achieve urban sustainability and smart city goals.

As Malaysia moves towards a greener and smarter future, EXAL is positioning itself at the forefront of the transformation. Through projects such as SOL Estate, Ko said, the group is setting new standards for housing and smart city development.



# Significant changes to stamp duty – part two

LAST week, part one dealt with some of the changes to stamp duty proposed in the Finance Bill 2024. The Bill became law on Dec 31, 2024.

Self-assessment on stamp duty will be implemented in three stages: from Jan 1, 2026, to Jan 1, 2028. It is compulsory for instruments to be stamped as the Inland Revenue Board (IRB) is empowered to audit taxpayers' records and can raise additional assessments going back five years after the date the duty is paid or would have been paid (there is no time limit for fraud, wilful default or negligent cases). New penalties provisions have been introduced for filing incorrect return. Late stamping penalty rates has been increased from Jan 1, 2025.

This week, the other significant changes in stamp duty that taxpayers should be aware of will be dealt with.

## Significant changes effective from Jan 1, 2025

All tenancy/rental agreements entered into from Jan 1 2025 must be stamped, and the rates will range from RM1 to RM7 for every RM250 of average annual rent, depending on the lease term. Previously, rates ranged RM1 to RM4 of the average

annual rent. The exemption from stamp duty for tenancy agreement with an average annual rental not more than RM2,400 has been removed.

An exchange of real property between family members such as spouses, parent and child, grandparent and grandchild or among siblings will attract a flat stamp duty of RM10.

An assignment of life insurance policy by way of gift or trust is subject to a flat rate of stamp duty ranging from a minimum of RM10 for a sum insured of not exceeding RM100,000, to a maximum duty of RM1,000 for a sum insured exceeding RM1 million.

When there is an exchange, partition or division of real property

between connected or independent parties up to Dec 31, 2024, stamp duty was only payable if the transaction involved a consideration.

However, from Jan 1, 2025, whether or not there is a consideration, stamp duty between 1% and 4% is payable depending on the market value of the property. However, where the transferor and transferee in the partition or division of real property are the co-owners of the property, a flat stamp duty of RM10 applies.

## Significant changes from Jan 1, 2026

With the introduction of the self-assessment system in 2026, an

opportunity is now given to the taxpayer who has paid duty excessively because of an error or mistake in a return made by the taxpayer to apply for relief in writing to the IRB within 24 months after the return is furnished.

In Peninsular Malaysia, if the instrument/agreement, book, accounts, record or other documents are kept in any language other than in Bahasa Malaysia, the IRB can request for the documents to be translated to Bahasa Malaysia within a timeframe specified by the IRB. However, in Sabah and Sarawak, the books can be either in English or Bahasa Malaysia.

From the introduction of the self-assessment system in 2026, any applications for relief from stamp duty involving reconstruction or amalgamation of companies, or

transfer of property between associate companies will require the acquirer to furnish the stamp duty return which was not applicable prior to 2026. An important point to note is where applications for relief from stamp duty is sought, the stamp duty must be paid upfront. If the relief is approved, the stamp duty will be refunded thereafter.

It should be re-emphasised that under the self-assessment system, the imposition of stamp duty is mandatory. Stamp duty is no longer something that can be ignored as non-compliance will become expensive.

*This article is contributed by Thannees Tax Consulting Services Sdn Bhd managing director SM Thanneermalai (www.thannees.com).*



**TAX MATTERS**  
BY B. S. M. THANNEERMALAI

## Cagamas ends 2024 on a high, raising RM21b amid global market volatility

**PETALING JAYA:** Cagamas Bhd, the National Mortgage Corporation of Malaysia, concluded its funding activities for 2024, raising a total of RM21.31 billion.

The achievement comes despite a year marked by significant market volatility, influenced by Federal Reserve policy shifts and geopolitical uncertainties including the US election and tensions in the Middle East, further reaffirming its role as a key player in Malaysia's debt capital market and liquidity provider to the financial system under complex market conditions.

President/CEO Kameel Abdul

Halim said, "In a year of uncertainty and heightened market volatility, Cagamas remained committed to providing essential liquidity to the financial system. Securing RM21.31 billion in total funding underscores our strong market position, investor trust, and dedication to supporting Malaysia's financial stability. As we navigate global challenges, we continue to be agile and responsive to evolving market needs, contributing to the resilience and stability of the financial landscape."

Cagamas advanced its focus on social responsibility agenda in 2024,



National Mortgage Corporation of Malaysia

making significant strides in sustainability. The Company executed its inaugural social repo and issued various sustainability-related bonds and sukuk, supporting inclusive and responsible financing, setting a new benchmark in sustainable finance. These initiatives position Cagamas as a key player in driving Malaysia's sustainable development agenda,

aligned with its commitment to creating lasting societal impact and promoting responsible growth in the financial sector.

"We are grateful for the ongoing support from international investors, which highlights Cagamas' credibility and resilience in navigating a volatile market environment. This support enabled us to expand access to diverse liquidity sources by raising a total of RM2.59 billion equivalent via multiples issuances of foreign currency.

"Access to international liquidity pools ensures Cagamas remains

well-equipped to meet the liquidity requirements of asset-selling financial institutions while maintaining a strong foothold in regional capital markets," Kameel said.

Looking ahead, Cagamas is dedicated to strengthening the secondary mortgage market and advancing the development of the capital market in 2025 and beyond.

This reinforces the Company's role as a secondary mortgage corporation, ensuring continued liquidity for primary lenders of home financing and housing loans.

## pitchIN's BidNow celebrates token listing on Hata Global, Coinstore

**PETALING JAYA:** pitchIN, Malaysia's digital fundraising and investment hub, announced its first token crowdfunding campaign, BidNow, that lists its token, \$BID, on Hata Global and Coinstore.

This marks a major milestone for pitchIN, BidNow and the growing Web3 ecosystem in Malaysia as the first digital token approved under the initial exchange offering framework to be listed on an exchange.

The achievement highlights a unique feature of Malaysia's regulatory framework. Malaysia is one of the few jurisdictions that regulates fundraising activities using utility tokens. This presents a unique opportunity for companies to launch their tokens in a regulatory-compliant manner.

As a regulated avenue, pitchIN also provides a safe space for established Malaysian companies to venture into Web3, and the opportunity for home-grown Web3 startups to raise seed and growth capital from the public in compliance with regulatory requirements.

## Swift Energy shines with robust financial performance in Q4, FY24

**SHAH ALAM:** Swift Energy Technology Bhd, a local industrial automation and power systems provider, showcased robust growth across key segments in its financial results for the fourth quarter and the financial year ended Sept 30, 2024 (Q4'24 and FY24).

For the quarter under review, Swift Energy and its subsidiaries reported revenue of RM29.3 million.

The manufacturing segment remained the key driver of Swift Energy's business, contributing about 75% of total revenue. The Malaysian market was the largest revenue contributor, accounting for 35.84% of the total for the quarter. The group's gross profit margin for Q4'24 was 48.26%, and profit after tax (PAT) amounted to RM5.35 million.

For FY24, the group's revenue increased by 19.82% or RM18.32 million, from RM92.43 million to RM110.75 million. The manufacturing segment contributed 79.22%, while the engineering services segment accounted for 6.52% of total revenue.

Swift Energy's main manufacturing segment demonstrated substantial growth, increasing by 22.79%, from RM71.45 million in FY23 to RM87.74



Swift Energy's booth at Oil & Gas Asia 2019. The company remains optimistic about the future, supported by several key industry trends. – SWIFT ENERGY FB PIC

million in FY24.

The increase coincides with the rise in solutions provided from Malaysia and Thailand, which demonstrated revenue growth of 23.95% and 79.71% respectively from the preceding year. The group's gross profit margin for FY24 stood at 42.35%, an improvement compared to 40.29 in FY23. The group's PAT for FY24 increased by 39.61% or RM4.83 million, from RM12.20 million in FY23

to RM17.03 million, in tandem with the growth in revenue.

"Our strong financial performance in FY24 underscores the effectiveness of our strategic initiatives and our commitment to delivering value to our stakeholders," Swift Energy CEO Tan Bin Chee said, adding that its strength lies in its ability to innovate and adapt to industry demands, backed by its IECEx-certified Ex solar photovoltaic (PV) modules, which set

them apart as a trusted solutions provider in the oil and gas industry.

"Our strategic collaborations with global technological leaders like Siemens further amplify our capabilities and market position. As we continue to leverage these competitive advantages, we are well-positioned to capitalise on global trends in industrial automation and renewable energy, driving sustainable growth and innovation," he said.

Swift Energy remains optimistic about the future, supported by several key industry trends. The increasing global demand for efficiency, sustainability and innovation is driving adoption of advanced technologies such as Internet of Things-enabled systems and energy-efficient solutions.

The push for decarbonisation continues to accelerate the adoption of solar PV systems and other green technologies, with governments implementing supportive policies and subsidies.

Rapid industrialisation, urbanisation, and focus on clean energy transitions in the Asia-Pacific region present vast growth opportunities, particularly in emerging markets.

BY DAVID BLACK  
CEO and Founder of Blackbox  
Research

# Unlocking Malaysia's e-commerce growth: The role of logistics

**S**OUTHEAST Asia's digital economy is at an inflection point, with e-commerce driving rapid digital adoption and reshaping consumer habits at an unprecedented pace.

Today, Malaysia sits at the heart of this transformation, uniquely positioned to harness the e-commerce boom sweeping across the region. Yet, to fully capitalise on its potential and not lose ground to its neighbours, Malaysia must confront key challenges, including its logistics infrastructure.

As part of Blackbox Research's continued commitment to decoding the region's economic dynamics, I am pleased to introduce our latest whitepaper *Grasping the E-Commerce Opportunity in Southeast Asia*.

This study zeroes in on Malaysia, not only for its central role in Southeast Asia but also for its untapped potential to become a regional e-commerce powerhouse.

Through 30 hours of in-depth interviews with 17 expert voices within the e-commerce and logistics sector, we explored the critical opportunities and barriers shaping Malaysia's e-commerce landscape.

Malaysia's strategic location, strong courier networks, and growing digital consumer base provide a solid foundation for e-commerce success. However, logistical inefficiencies leading to service inconsistencies and increasing delivery costs are major challenges that could hinder the nation's e-commerce growth.

## Malaysia's strategic position in Southeast Asia's e-commerce landscape

Malaysia has steadily emerged as a key player in Southeast Asia's digital economy, ranking second in regional e-commerce performance – narrowly edging ahead of Indonesia and Thailand – according to the perceptions of the experts surveyed in our study. With high mobile penetration and a digitally savvy population, Malaysia is poised to cement its role as a vital hub for the region.

Despite these advantages, Singapore leads the pack, with 59% of experts ranking it first for its advanced infrastructure and strong government backing. Malaysia must close the innovation and logistics gaps to compete at this level.

Strategic initiatives such as the National eCommerce Strategic Roadmap and the Digital Free Trade Zones are already in place to catalyse this growth. But further effort and solutions will be needed including fostering inclusive and consistent dialogues with policies shaped by input from all stakeholders – including e-commerce platforms, sellers, and logistics providers alike.

## The logistics sector: A backbone in need of strengthening

Logistics is the critical lifeline of any e-commerce ecosystem, and in Malaysia, it has become a double-edged sword. High logistical costs, especially for shipping between Peninsular and East Malaysia, are major bottlenecks that stifle business growth: only 6 of 17 experts in our study considered Malaysia's logistics infrastructure as supportive of sector development.

For those who feel the system is hindering progress, the accumulation of costs borne by



Malaysia's strategic location, strong courier networks, and growing digital consumer base provide a solid foundation for e-commerce success, says Black.

sellers such as rising logistics expenses, import costs, and taxes, combined with currency fluctuations, is making it increasingly challenging for them to remain cost competitive.

Advanced logistics technologies such as AI-powered route optimisation and real-time tracking, hold the promise of unlocking greater efficiencies. Experts in our study emphasised the need to prioritise the establishment of regional e-fulfillment centres to tackle last-mile delivery challenges and streamline logistics nationwide, a move that could greatly enhance Malaysia's regional competitiveness.

However, the bare truth remains that rising base costs of logistics pose a serious threat for sellers, creating a ripple effect that erodes already slim profit margins and places smaller players in an increasingly precarious position.

For some, this escalating financial pressure could spell the difference between survival and being forced

out of the market, particularly for those already struggling to compete in an intensely competitive landscape.

As businesses grapple with rising operating expenses and consumers face inflated prices, Malaysia risks losing its competitive edge. This underscores an urgent need for targeted measures to reduce delivery costs and bridge the gaps between Peninsular and East Malaysia, as well as underserved areas.

## The role of public-private collaboration in driving growth

Insights from the study's experts highlighted that aligning public and private efforts is key to positioning Malaysia as a competitive e-commerce and logistics hub in Southeast Asia, unlocking new opportunities and shared prosperity for the sector.

This is especially evident as leading e-commerce nations thrive on a symbiotic relationship between public and private sectors.

For Malaysia to achieve a similar transformation, collaboration among e-commerce platforms, third-party logistics providers, and government bodies will be essential to addressing last-mile delivery inefficiencies and cross-border shipping complexities.

Our whitepaper highlights the importance of targeted infrastructure investment in rural regions: our study found that delivery costs could be reduced by up to 60% with the establishment of fulfillment hubs.

These improvements, coupled with ongoing digitalisation initiatives and leveraging established e-commerce trends like social selling and customer-centric services such as same day delivery – practices that are common in neighbouring countries – will position Malaysia's e-commerce sector to thrive on a global scale.

## A call to action for Malaysia's e-commerce future

Malaysia's e-commerce story is one

of great promise, but the next chapter depends on decisive action. Gross Merchandise Value in Malaysia is expected to double by 2030, but this forecast growth rate lags some of its Southeast Asian neighbours.

It can be said that the stakes have never been higher. The findings in our whitepaper illuminate the path forward: invest in logistics innovation, foster inclusive public-private dialogue, regulate with dexterity and creativity, and build infrastructure that supports both urban and rural markets.

As always, Blackbox Research is glad to contribute to this critical discussion. By addressing logistical inefficiencies head-on, Malaysia has the potential to secure its position as a regional leader, delivering prosperity to businesses and consumers alike.

I invite policymakers, industry leaders, and stakeholders to join this journey of transformation, ensuring that Malaysia realises its e-commerce potential.



# Singapore HDB resale prices rise 9.6% in 2024

➤ Eight out of 10 of city-state's citizens live in public housing

**SINGAPORE:** Resale public housing prices in Singapore, one of the world's most expensive cities, rose by 9.6% in 2024, according to preliminary government data released last week.

Eight out of 10 of citizens live in Housing & Development Board (HDB) flats built and sold by the government, and housing affordability is a key issue alongside high living costs ahead of a general election in 2025.

The price increase was almost double the 4.9% rise in 2023.

The number of resale HDB flats exchanging hands was 8% higher than in 2023.

In August the government moved to cool public housing prices, reducing the amount

buyers can borrow for a resale flat to 75% of its valuation from 80%.

Sales of public housing units for more than S\$1 million (RM3.2 million) have made headlines in recent years, with the government last week urging households to "exercise prudence".

"Those who buy high will be hit harder if prices weaken," the housing authority said, adding resale prices were driven by strong broad-based demand and supply tightness in the market.

Christine Sun, chief researcher at OrangeTee, said the rise reflected fewer newly eligible units being offered for sale which intensified demand for them.

Singaporean homeowners must stay in a new flat for at least five years before it can be sold. There were 11,952 such flats on the market in 2024 compared to 30,920 in 2022, according to OrangeTee.

Sun said increased grants to first-time buyers of resale flats, announced by the government in August, had also fed through to demand and prices.

Singapore's property market had defied global pandemic trends with property prices rising instead of falling.

Resale public flat prices rose 10.4% in 2022 and 12.7% in 2021.

Sun said more cooling measures could come into effect this year.

"It could be possible if resale volume rebounds in the first and second quarters, or more flats are selling for more than S\$1 million." - Reuters



EVs waiting to be loaded on the BYD Explorer NO.1, a domestically manufactured vessel intended to export Chinese automobiles, at Yantai port. - AFP/IC

## Sales surge for BYD as firm grows overseas presence

**SHANGHAI:** Leading Chinese electric car maker BYD's vehicle sales surged in 2024, the company said in a statement, as the firm grows its overseas presence.

The EV and battery giant is the most prominent of Chinese automotive firms expanding abroad - plans that are increasingly threatened by thorny trade disputes between Beijing and the West.

BYD sold 4,272,145 vehicles last year, up 41.3% from 2023's 3,024,417 units, the company said.

In December alone, BYD sold 57,154 vehicles outside of China - a 58.3% jump from the same period in 2023.

But BYD still sold almost 90% of its cars in its home market last month.

The majority of the company's 2024 sales

were for plug-in hybrid models - 58% of total units sold.

BYD - which adopts the English slogan "Build Your Dreams" - is the biggest EV manufacturer in China, the world's largest automotive market.

The company's quarterly revenue surpassed global rival Tesla's for the first time during the third quarter last year.

The initial rapid sales growth of BYD and its industry peers in their home market was facilitated in part by generous subsidies from Beijing.

The European Union has said that extensive state support has led to unfair competition, with an investigation by the bloc finding that Beijing's subsidies were undercutting local competitors.

The EU announced in October that it would

levy extra tariffs of up to 35.3% on Chinese EVs, prompting Beijing to say it would "take all necessary measures" to protect firms' interests.

Earlier in 2024, the United States and Canada raised customs duties on Chinese EVs to 100%.

BYD's figures come after global EV sales hit a record 1.8 million units in November, according to industry research company Rho Motion.

"This quarter has picked up significantly for EV sales globally as we see record-breaking month after record-breaking month," Rho Motion expert Charles Lester said in a press release last month.

"However, the regional picture is somewhat uneven with Europe shrinking 3% this year so far and once more China accounts for over two thirds of the electric vehicles sold in November." - AFP

## Indian banks' loan growth drops for fifth month

**MUMBAI:** Indian banks' loan growth moderated for a fifth straight month in November, central bank data showed, as lenders continued to rein in unsecured and personal loans after the Reserve Bank of India's crackdown on "exuberant" lending.

Banks' credit increased by 11.8% year-on-year last month, slower than the 16.5% rise in November 2023, excluding the impact of HDFC Bank's merger with its parent Housing Development Finance Corp, according to Reserve Bank of India data.

Including the impact of the merger, banks' loans grew 10.6% last month, compared with nearly 21% in the year-ago period.

The growth rate had slowed to 12.8% in October, excluding the merger, and to 11.5% including the merger.

Loan growth had also moderated in July, August and September.

Indian banks have consistently reported double-digit loan growth for a while, helped by healthy retail demand and urban consumption.

However, in late 2023, the RBI, worried about the risk of bad loans, imposed higher capital requirements on personal loans and credit cards, which is now translating into slower growth in these segments.

Banks' personal loan growth slowed to 12.2% in November from 22.4% a year ago, excluding the HDFC Bank merger impact, while growth in outstanding credit card debt dropped to 18.1% from 34.2% a year ago, the data showed.

The Reserve Bank of India has also warned the financial sector against "all forms of exuberance", asked lenders to be watchful of a build-up in stress due to new lending models and flagged concerns about the interconnectedness between banks and non-banking finance companies (NBFCs).

Credit growth to the services sector decelerated to 14.4% in November from 22.2% a year ago, primarily due to lower growth in credit to NBFCs.

On the flip side, loans to industry grew by 8.1% year-on-year last month, quicker than the 5.5% loan growth last year. - Reuters

## December inflation in Indonesia steady at 1.57%

**JAKARTA:** Indonesia's annual inflation rate in December was 1.57%, barely changed from 1.55% in the previous month, official data showed, and close to economists' estimate of a 1.60% rate in a Reuters poll.

The annual core inflation rate, which strips out government-controlled prices and volatile food prices, was 2.26% in December, the same as November and close to the poll forecast of 2.28%.

The country's central bank has targeted inflation in 2024 and 2025 to be within a range of 1.5% to 3.5%.

Policymakers at Bank Indonesia have repeatedly said they were monitoring global developments to determine the right time to continue easing monetary policy.

The central bank cut rates in September, but has since paused despite inflation being at near the lower end of its target range, due to financial market volatility and weakness in the rupiah currency. - Reuters



# ETFs could face obstacles in 2025

➤ Analyst sees possible record number of funds closing down

**NEW YORK:** US exchange-traded funds could face more obstacles to their runaway growth in 2025 after a bumper year saw the products take in a record US\$1.1 trillion (RM4.9 trillion) in inflows in 2024.

The inflows were the most in the product's 35-year history and came close to doubling last year's figure of US\$597 billion.

Analysts attribute the popularity of the products to a combination of the bull market in the US, where the lion's share of ETFs is based, the advent of innovative cryptocurrency and options-based products and the growing preference by investors for lower-cost, liquid ETFs over mutual funds.

Now, while many believe ETFs will top 2024's records in 2025, they are cautiously eyeing a new set of challenges ranging from how to navigate an increasingly crowded ETF

arena to the ever-present question of innovation.

"I find myself thinking that new product development may have outstripped investor interest in some of the most complex of these strategies," said Bryan Armour, ETF analyst at Morningstar.

"Not every product will 'land' with investors." Indeed, one of Armour's projections for 2025 is that the market is likely to see a record number of ETFs closing down.

While asset managers shuttered some 186 funds in 2024 - 91% of which had less than US\$250 million in assets - Armour expects that figure to soar next year above the record of 253 set in 2023.

"There has been so much product development, and a lot of ETFs won't survive to reach profitability simply because they don't

have anything that's unique enough and appealing enough to pull in assets," Armour said.

According to Cerulli Research, 2023 was the first year that saw the average lifespan of an ETF decline, and by early 2024 it had already fallen below 5 years.

"Firms realize they have to be faster at closing down funds that don't attract assets and at redeploying their resources," said Matt Apkarian, associate director at Cerulli.

Still, industry insiders say there are many reasons to be bullish about an industry that globally jumped to US\$14 trillion in assets as of Dec 27, from US\$11.6 trillion as of Dec 31, 2023, according to industry research firm ETFGI.

The number of new ETFs launched, including a dozen spot bitcoin products, reached 714 by the last full week of the year, said Matthew Bartolini, head of SPDR Americas Research at State Street Global Advisors.

That compares to 543 launches in 2022 and 480 in 2021.

The explosion in the number of ETFs can be

traced in part to the surge in interest for products that use options to manage, limit or even accentuate risk.

The proliferation of buffer and defined outcome ETFs, which use options to trade off upside potential for downside risk, or to hit a target return, is one of the biggest features of 2024.

"We'll be venturing into that market in the first quarter of 2025 with a buffered ETF product," said Brendan McCarthy, global head of ETF distribution and capital markets at Goldman Sachs Capital Management.

The two-year-old GraniteShares 2x Long Nvidia ETF which offers investors double the daily return on Nvidia, rose 177% in 2024, attracting more than US\$3.5 billion in new assets during the year to bring total assets to nearly US\$6 billion.

"There's no reason to think that US\$1 trillion isn't the new normal for inflows," said David Mann, global head of ETF product and capital markets at Franklin Templeton.

"This has been a one-way train ride, and now the train is on the express track." - Reuters

## Apple offers iPhone discounts in China

**BEIJING:** Apple is offering rare discounts of up to 500 yuan (RM308) on its latest iPhone models in China, as the US tech giant moves to defend its market share against rising competition from domestic rivals like Huawei.

The four-day promotion, running from Jan 4 to 7, applies to several iPhone models when purchased using specific payment methods, according to its website.

The flagship iPhone 16 Pro with a starting price of 7,999 yuan and the iPhone 16 Pro Max with a starting price of 9,999 yuan will see the highest discount of 500 yuan. The iPhone 16 and iPhone 16 Plus will receive a 400 yuan reduction.

The discounts come as consumers remain cautious with spending amid China's slowing economy and deflationary pressures, with the country's consumer inflation hitting a five-month low in November.

Apple is grappling with declining market share in China, the world's largest smartphone market, where local manufacturers have intensified competition.

Huawei has emerged as a particularly strong challenger since its return to the premium segment in August 2023 with locally-made chipsets.

Huawei had cut the prices of a variety of high-end devices, including mobile phones, by up

to 3,000 yuan over the weekend on one of China's leading e-commerce platforms.

Apple briefly fell out of China's top five smartphone vendors in the second quarter of 2024 before recovering in the third quarter.

The US company's smartphone sales in China still slipped 0.3% during the third quarter from a year earlier, while Huawei's sales surged 42%.

The Apple promotion includes discounts of 200 to 300 yuan on older iPhone models, as well as products such as MacBook laptops and iPad tablets.

Customers must use designated payment methods including WeChat Pay or Alipay to qualify for the discounts. - Reuters

## US considers rules to restrict or bar Chinese drones

**WASHINGTON:** The US Commerce Department said last week it is considering new rules that would impose restrictions on Chinese drones that would restrict or ban them in the United States citing national security concerns.

The department said it was seeking public comments by March 4 on potential rules to safeguard the supply chain for drones, saying threats from China and Russia "may offer our adversaries the ability to remotely access and manipulate these devices, exposing sensitive US data".

China accounts for the vast majority of US commercial drone sales.

In September, Commerce Secretary Gina Raimondo said the department could impose restrictions similar to those that would effectively ban Chinese vehicles from the United States and the focus will be on drones with Chinese and Russian equipment, chips and software.

She told Reuters in November she hopes to finalise the rules on Chinese vehicles by Jan 20.

A decision to write new rules restricting or banning Chinese drones will be made by the administration of President-elect Donald Trump, who takes over on Jan 20.

Washington has taken a series of steps to crack down on Chinese drones over the last year.

Last month, President Joe Biden signed legislation that could ban China-based DJI and Autel Robotics from selling new drone models in the US.

A unspecified US agency must determine within one year if drones from DJI or Autel Robotics pose unacceptable national security risks.

DJI, the world's largest drone manufacturer that sells more than half of all US commercial drones, said if no agency completes the study it would prevent the company from launching new products in America. - Reuters



A man checking an iPhone 16 Pro Max at an Apple store in Beijing. - REUTERS/SPIC

## Morgan Stanley to leave banking sector climate coalition

**NEW YORK:** Investment bank Morgan Stanley said last week it had decided to leave the Net-Zero Banking Alliance (NZBA), becoming the latest US lender to quit the sector's top global climate coalition.

While the bank gave no reason for its decision, top banks have been under pressure

from some US Republican politicians over their membership, with accusations that any move to limit finance to fossil fuel companies could breach antitrust rules.

Despite leaving the NZBA, Morgan Stanley said in a statement that its commitment to helping the world transition to net-zero

carbon emissions "remains unchanged".

"We aim to contribute to real-economy decarbonisation by providing our clients with the advice and capital required to transform business models and reduce carbon intensity," it said.

The bank said it would also continue to

report on its efforts towards previously set 2030 targets to reduce the emissions tied to its loan book.

The decision by Morgan Stanley follows similar moves in recent weeks by Citigroup, Bank of America, Wells Fargo and Goldman Sachs. - Reuters



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## Consortium bids below minimum fee for Islamabad Airport ops

**KARACHI:** A Turkish consortium, the sole bidder to take over the operations of Pakistan's Islamabad airport, has offered a concession fee below the minimum threshold, the chairman of the bid evaluation committee said.

The cash-strapped South Asian country is looking to generate revenue by speeding up a privatisation push, including outsourcing the running of three major airports.

The consortium, comprising Terminal Yapi, ERG Insaat and ERG UK, bid to pay the government 47% of its revenue from operations in the form of a concession fee, short of the 56% minimum set by the government, the aviation and airports authority said.

The matter will now be referred to the International Finance Corporation (IFC) – a member of the World Bank Group, which is advising Islamabad on the outsourcing – before Pakistan takes a decision on whether the bid can go through.

“The details of the financial proposal will ... be presented and forwarded to the IFC for further evaluation and submission of final reports,” said Sadiq ur Rehman, the chairman of the bid evaluation committee and deputy director general of Pakistan Airports Authority. – Reuters

## UK-based Merlin Entertainments closes three sites in Turkiye

**LONDON:** UK-headquartered Merlin Entertainments said last week it was closing three attractions in Turkiye including a local branch of the famous Madame Tussauds wax museum.

The firm, which operates many theme parks worldwide, is also closing its Legoland Discovery Centre in the country and a Sea Life aquarium, a spokesman told AFP.

The three sites, all located in Istanbul, would permanently shut their doors due to poor commercial performance, the company said.

The marine animals housed at the aquarium would be transferred to other attractions, it added.

Turkiye has seen continuous double-digit inflation since the end of 2019, hitting family budgets for leisure activities.

Merlin saw its results slip into the red in 2023, posting an annual net loss of £217 million (RM1.2 billion dollars) compared to a profit of £89 million a year earlier.

The company, whose attractions boast more than 60 million visitors each year in 23 countries, manages the London Eye Ferris wheel, the Madame Tussauds wax museums and the Legoland parks. – AFP



An employee working at a steel processing production line of a factory in Mandi Gobindgarh in the northern Indian state of Punjab.

– REUTERS/IC

**NEW DELHI:** Factory activity in Asia and Europe ended 2024 on a soft note as expectations for the new year soured amid growing trade risks from a second Donald Trump presidency and China's fragile economic recovery.

A manufacturing slowdown in the euro zone intensified last month, with scant signs of a rebound anytime soon as the bloc's three largest economies – Germany, France and Italy – remained stuck in an industrial recession.

Manufacturing purchasing managers' indexes for December from across Asia published last week showed factory activity slowing in China and South Korea although there were some signs of a pickup in Taiwan and Southeast Asia.

Trump has pledged to impose tariffs across the board, with bigger barriers on imports from three major trading partners – Mexico, Canada and China.

The Caixin/S&P Global manufacturing PMI for China nudged down to 50.5 in December from 51.5 the previous month, undershooting analysts' forecasts and indicating activity grew only modestly.

Gabriel Ng, assistant economist at Capital Economics, said Beijing's increased policy support in late 2024 provided a near-term boost to

# Asian and European factory activity slows

» Trump's tariff threats impact major trading partners

growth, which is likely to be seen in other fourth quarter indicators.

“And this improvement should carry over into early 2025,” Ng said.

“But the boost probably won't last more than a few quarters, with Trump likely to follow through on his tariff threat before long and persistent structural imbalances still weighing on the economy.”

In Europe, HCOB's euro zone manufacturing Purchasing Managers' Index, compiled by S&P Global, dipped to 45.1 in December, just under a preliminary estimate and further below the 50 mark separating

growth from contraction, where it has been since mid-2022.

“Output in the euro zone remained under pressure at the end of 2024, held back by a continued slide in new orders in both the domestic market and in exports,” noted Claus Vistesen, chief euro zone economist at Pantheon.

Factory activity in Germany fell deeper into contraction territory last month on sharper declines in output and new orders while activity in France declined at the fastest pace in more than four years.

In Britain, outside the European Union, factory activity shrank at the quickest rate in 11 months and firms reduced staffing levels due to higher taxes and weak foreign demand.

Elsewhere in Asia, South Korea's PMI showed activity shrinking in December and the decline in output gathering pace, a stark contrast to

better-than-forecast export growth figures released last week.

South Korea's central bank governor said the pace of monetary policy easing would need to be flexible this year due to heightened political and economic uncertainty.

South Korea is also dealing with the hit to business confidence from a political crisis after a failed bid by President Yoon Suk Yeol last month to impose martial law.

Earlier in the week, Japan's PMI showed activity shrinking in December, albeit at a slower pace.

Malaysia and Vietnam also reported declines in factory activity.

India's manufacturing activity grew at its weakest pace for 2024, its PMI showed, although the economic powerhouse's factories continued to outperform regional peers, reporting uninterrupted expansion for the past three-and-a-half years. – Reuters

## Electric cars take 89% of Norway market in 2024

**OSLO:** Electric cars accounted for 89% of the new cars sold in Norway last year, a report said, pushing the country closer to reaching its goal of going fully electric by 2025.

“We need only 10% more to reach the objective for 2025,” the Norwegian Road Federation (OFV) said in a statement.

Of the 128,691 new car registrations last year, 114,400 were electric, the highest share of any major national car market and up

from an 82% share in 2023.

Despite being a major oil and gas producer, Norway aims for all new cars sold to be “zero emission” starting in 2025, which is 10 years ahead of the goal set by the European Union, of which Norway is not a member.

In 2012, electric cars accounted for just 2.8% of sales, but they have since exploded thanks to various incentives.

Electric cars were exempted from

many taxes, making them competitive against heavily taxed internal combustion cars.

They have also benefitted from toll exemptions, free parking in public car parks, and the use of public transport traffic lanes.

While some tax breaks and incentives have been rolled back over the years, electric cars have become commonplace.

“It is crucial to maintain the incentives that favour the purchase

of electric cars if the government and parliament are to achieve the goal they themselves set,” Oyvind Solberg Thorsen, director of OFV, said.

Tesla is the leading electric car company in Norway, with 19% of the market, followed by Volkswagen, Toyota, Volvo and BMW.

“In 2025, it will be interesting to see whether new Chinese brands and models will manage to strengthen their position among buyers,” said Thorsen. – AFP



# 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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## Healthy demand outlook puts VS Industry in upbeat mood

**JOHOR BAHRU:** Electronics Manufacturing Services (EMS) provider in Malaysia, VS Industry Bhd is upbeat on their prospects as they move into the new financial year (FY25), said managing director Datuk SY Gan.

Speaking after its 42nd AGM on Friday, he said that this is underpinned by the healthy demand outlook from their existing customers and their new manufacturing facility in the Philippines.

"The uptrend in orders is sustaining and further supported by upcoming new product launches from our key customers. The recent interest rate cuts in the US provide a welcome boost to businesses and consumer sentiment," he added.

On the other hand, he said they continue to be excited by their venture in the Philippines given the potential.

"The group has secured new orders with an expected aggregate value of RM1.5 billion over the next two years. Renovation of our new plant is at its tail end, and we target to start production in the coming months," disclosed Gan in a statement.

He said their optimism is also reflected in their capital expenditure (capex) strategy.

"We have allocated around RM150 million in capex for FY25 with the bulk of it earmarked for the facility in the Philippines, acquisition of new factory in Indonesia as well as maintenance capex for our Malaysia operations. These investments enable us to strengthen our foundation as we advance towards new horizons for the group," Gan added.

VS continued with its quarterly dividend payout practice in FY24. Total dividend per share amounted to 2.2 sen or RM84.8 million.

## Ringgit softens as dollar stays near 2-year high on jobs data

**THE** ringgit extended its loss to close lower against the US dollar on Friday as robust US jobs data held the greenback at a near two-year high.

At 6pm, the ringgit slid to 4.4975/5030 against the American dollar from Thursday's close of 4.4760/4810.

The US weekly jobless claims last week dropped 9,000 to 211,000 – an eight-month low – as the American labour market showed resilience.

UOB Kay Hian Wealth Advisors head of investment research Mohd Sedek Jantan told Bernama that strong US jobs data has heightened expectations that the US Federal Open Market Committee (FOMC) will maintain interest rates during its upcoming Jan 28-29 meeting. Besides, he said concerns over tariffs and policy directions under the incoming Trump administration have unsettled markets, pushing US Treasury yields nearly 100 basis points higher from their September lows.

The ringgit closed mostly higher against other major currencies.

It slipped versus the Japanese yen to 2.8606/8643 from Thursday's close of 2.8546/8580 but rose against the British pound to 5.5800/5869 from 5.5869/5932 previously and strengthened vis-a-vis the euro to 4.6288/6345 from 4.6336/6387.

The local note traded mixed against Asean currencies.

It dipped against the Thai baht to 13.0540/0753 from 13.0530/0744 at the previous close and was lower vis-a-vis the Indonesian rupiah at 277.6/278.1 compared with 276.2/276.7 previously.

The ringgit was strengthened versus the Singapore dollar to 3.2828/2871 from 3.2859/2898 and remained flat versus the Philippine peso at 7.73/7.74 from 7.73/7.75 on Thursday.

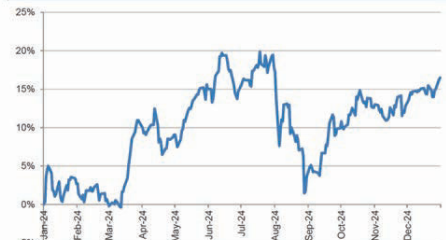
## Exchange Rates

FOREIGN CURRENCY	SELLING TT/OD	BUYING TT	BUYING OD
1 US Dollar	4.5540	4.4210	4.4110
1 Australian Dollar	2.8460	2.7330	2.7170
1 Brunei Dollar	3.3280	3.2310	3.2230
1 Canadian Dollar	3.1630	3.0790	3.0670
1 Euro	4.6860	4.5350	4.5150
1 New Zealand Dollar	2.5640	2.4700	2.4540
1 Singapore Dollar	3.3280	3.2310	3.2230
1 Sterling Pound	5.6530	5.4760	5.4560
1 Swiss Franc	5.0310	4.8180	4.8030
100 UAE Dirham	125.4400	119.0000	118.8000
100 Bangladesh Taka	3.8260	3.5640	3.3640
100 Chinese Renminbi	62.8100	60.1900	N/A
100 Danish Krone	64.3800	59.2700	59.0700
100 Hongkong Dollar	59.1800	56.2600	56.0600
100 Indian Rupee	5.4000	5.0700	4.8700
100 Indonesian Rupiah	0.0291	0.0263	0.0213
100 Japanese Yen	2.9000	2.8070	2.7970
100 New Taiwan Dollar	14.9000	N/A	N/A
100 Norwegian Krone	41.1000	37.8200	37.6200
100 Pakistan Rupee	1.6600	1.5600	1.3600
100 Philippine Peso	7.9400	7.4900	7.2900
100 Qatar Riyal	126.3400	119.9400	119.7400
100 Saudi Riyal	122.6100	116.4000	116.2000
100 South Africa Rand	25.2500	22.8000	22.6000
100 Sri Lanka Rupee	1.5900	1.4700	1.2700
100 Swedish Krona	42.1800	38.4300	38.2300
100 Thai Baht	13.8300	12.2700	11.8700

Source: Malayan Banking Bhd/Bernama

## Real Estate Overweight

### KLPRP vs FBM KLCI in 2024



Source: RHB Research, Bloomberg

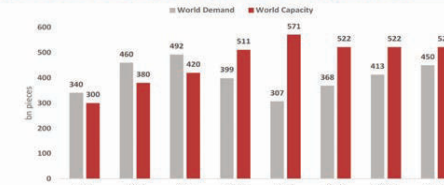
**OVER** the last five years, we have seen many developers gradually diversifying into other new businesses, in order to ramp up their steady income streams after going through almost a decade of slowdown in the property market. In our view, valuations of these companies should be re-rated further, given their better earnings quality and stability going forward. Sunway sets a good benchmark. We think investors should start to take positions in some of the companies such as Sime Darby Property, Mah Sing and Matrix Concepts. Apart from strengthening earnings, their growing recurring income businesses and investment property portfolio should lead to opportunities for value-unlocking – similar to the growth journey of Sunway.

Southeast Asia is still a sweet spot for global trade and will likely see foreign direct investments rise – benefiting from trade diversions after Donald Trump becomes the next US president later this month. Developers with exposure to industrial development should continue to benefit. Apart from land transactions and the development of industrial properties, demand in this area may also represent a strategic opportunity for developers to accumulate industrial property assets over the medium term.

We expect valuations of quality small-cap developers to catch up to that of larger peers – especially those with strong property sales, healthy balance sheets, strategic landbanks, and exposure to niche segments. The big-cap property stocks (top 20) have an average total return of 57% vs 16% for those ranked 21-40 by market cap in 2024. Consistent sales and earnings delivery would be the key for share price discovery. – RHB Research, Jan 3

## Glove Overweight

### Global Glove Demand & Supply Pointing to Sustained Excess Supply Over CY22-26



Source: Kenanga Research

**LOOKING** into CY25, we believe the sector will continue to gain traction driven by continuous earnings recovery, higher volume sales, improving supply-demand dynamics and potential increase in ASPs. The stage is set for a strong earnings recovery. Amplifying the optimism are: (i) indications pointing towards a strong demand recovery moving into CY25, underpinned by inventory rebuilding from distributors and faster-than-expected industry consolidation, (ii) glove players are optimistic that ASPs are expected to inch up gradually, potentially by US\$1.00 per 1,000 pieces to US\$20–22 per 1,000 pieces due to the uptick in demand and mitigation against the appreciating MYR against the USD; and (iii) the US imposition of tariff ratchets up to 50% and 100% in CY25 and CY26, respectively (revised up as announced on Sept 13), making Malaysian glove makers the prime beneficiaries.

Generally, glove makers have seen more enquiries from its US customers. The Office of the United States Trade Representative (USTR) has recently unveiled tariff increases on Chinese imports which include a higher tariff of 50% (instead of the 25% announced in May 2024, effective CY26) and 100% on China's rubber medical and surgical gloves' exports into the US beginning CY25 and CY26, respectively. Historically, the US accounts for 30–50% of sales volume of HARTA, KOSSAN, TOPGLOV and SUPERMAX.

Oversupply is less acute, potentially achieving equilibrium faster than expected. We expect the oversupply situation to be less acute and gradually improve following signs of players culling production capacity via decommissioning of selective plants and exit of new entrants. Based on our estimates, the demand-supply situation will only start to head towards equilibrium in CY26 when there is virtually no more net new capacity coming onstream while the global demand for gloves continues to rise by 15% per annum underpinned by rising hygiene awareness. – Kenanga Research, Jan 3

## Consumer Overweight

### Malaysia retail spending



Source: PublicInvest Research, CEIC

**WE** remain positive on the consumer staples industry, as we expect consumer spending to improve, driven by higher disposable income following the upward revision in wages for both private and public sectors. This is underpinned by the inelastic demand for essential consumer products. Additionally, resilient economic growth, improved labour market conditions, and higher tourist arrivals are expected to further support consumption. While there has been an uptick in commodity prices recently, we believe that a stable ringgit in 1H'25 will act as a buffer to mitigate the negative impact.

While rising cost of living continues to remain challenging among Malaysian consumers, spending on staple goods remained resilient, as evident in the YoY revenue growth (average +10.5%) among consumer staple companies under our coverage. The improved performance was primarily driven by enhanced operational efficiency, fuelled by higher sales volume and supported by lower raw material costs.

We expect consumer spending to improve in CY25, driven by the revised minimum wage of RM1,700/month (up from RM1,500/month) and salary hikes for civil servants. This should benefit F&B-related companies and retailers.

According to data from Tourism Malaysia, Malaysia's tourism industry saw a 26.1% growth YoY from Jan to Nov, with 22.5 million tourist arrivals. Meanwhile, tourist receipts grew by 50.8% YoY to RM45.4 billion from Jan to June. With Malaysia officially assuming the chair of Asean in 2025 and the launch of Visit Malaysia 2026, Tourism Malaysia aims to attract 35.6 million international tourists, targeting a tourism revenue of RM147.1 billion. We believe this increase in tourist receipts will bode well for the F&B related players and hospitality players. – PublicInvest Research, Jan 3



# Movie magic

Filmmaker's journey of storytelling - P22



## WEEKLY FOCUS

**MONDAY**  
Technology and social media

**TUESDAY**  
Travel and leisure

**WEDNESDAY**  
Fashion and beauty

**THURSDAY**  
Home and living

**FRIDAY**  
Food and beverage

- PIC COURTESY OF SYUENCHIA



# Bridging barriers through film

BY YASMIN ZULRAEZ

**B**ORN and raised in Kuala Lumpur, 24-year-old Syuen Chia's journey to becoming a filmmaker began with a deep-seated passion for storytelling and social justice. Now based in Los Angeles, she reflects on the challenges of transitioning to a new cultural environment while staying true to her roots in an exclusive interview with *theSun*.

"When I first started writing my scripts, I realised I was writing stories I could not quite connect with. Being in a place and culture so different from what I grew up in, I subconsciously tried to fit into the status quo. It was not until I was home in Malaysia during the pandemic I was reminded of the people and places that first ignited my love for storytelling," she told *theSun*.

This realisation became a turning point. Chia began weaving personal narratives set in Malaysia, finding curiosity and support from international audiences.

"Sharing my Malaysian culture and roots through my work has been a way for me to connect with home while I am away," she explained.

## Storytelling inspired by social justice

Chia's work often delves into the complexities of human connections and the barriers that divide us – themes deeply rooted in her personal experiences and social advocacy.

"From a young age, I have been passionate about social justice and involved in communities such as Architects of Diversity Malaysia," she shared.

Her films, such as the award-winning *When I Die*, explore these themes with a delicate balance of intimacy and universality.

"I love producing and directing films that give an intimate look into the relationships we have with one another and the complexities when these bonds are tested. I have seen the power of interpersonal relationships in causing ripples of positive change," Chia explained.

Growing up in Malaysia's multicultural environment also shaped her storytelling approach.

"Malaysia's rich tapestry of cultures, languages and traditions taught me about diverse stories and experiences. It also opened my eyes to the challenges of bridging divides between communities and identity groups. I am drawn to universal themes told through unique

▶ Malaysian writer-director crafts intimate narratives to explore humanity, culture



Chia has a deep-seated passion for storytelling and social justice. – ALL PICS COURTESY OF SYUEN CHIA

perspectives that highlight our shared humanity and our multifaceted selves."

## Exploring life, death and connection

Chia's short film *When I Die* has garnered recognition at prestigious festivals, including the LA International Shorts Fest and National Film Festival for Talented Youth. Inspired by her personal experiences, the film explores the universal yet deeply personal topic of death.

"Growing up, death felt like a taboo topic yet one that was also spoken about calmly. I wanted to tell a story about someone grappling with the concept of death for the first time," she said.

Through the lens of the protagonist Lianne, the film captures the uncertainties surrounding mortality and the struggles of



Chia's films explore sensitive themes with a delicate balance of intimacy and universality.

navigating grief. "Whether they relate to Lianne's journey or the parents' struggle to approach a sensitive topic, I hope

audiences find echoes of their own experiences within the frames of this story," Chia said.

The film's success is proof of her ability to blend universal themes with culturally specific nuances, a hallmark of her storytelling style.

## Exploring diverse roles in filmmaking

Chia's experience spans directing, producing and working as a camera assistant, each role enriching her perspective as a filmmaker.

"Being a director has given me a deep understanding of the creative process and how to best support a project I am producing by anticipating the needs of the director and team," she explained.

Her technical work as a camera assistant, including her time at Laika as a camera intern on their upcoming feature *Wildwood*, has honed her appreciation for visual storytelling.

"Stop-motion requires incredible



Chia's work often delves into themes deeply rooted in her personal experiences and social advocacy.

precision and attention to detail. It has made me a much more intentional filmmaker in my creative choices," she said.

These experiences have also shaped her collaborative approach to producing and directing.

"It is important to understand the core of the vision and invite the team to build on it. Collaboration often leads to a unified vision, (in which) everyone feels empowered."

## Amplifying local tales

A recurring theme in Chia's work is her dedication to sharing Malaysian stories with the world.



Chia's *Better Together* (2022), a story about family dynamics and substance abuse.



Chia's experience spans directing, producing and working as a camera assistant, each role enriching her perspective as a filmmaker.

## Telling universal stories with unique Malaysian perspective

From page 22

"I want to present universal experiences and emotions in a uniquely Malaysian context. For instance, late-night *Mamak* sessions, playing badminton over the gate with your neighbour and befriending the Aunty at your go-to *kopitiam* are small but resonant details that make our stories special," she explained.

One of her projects in development is a sports drama centred around a badminton athlete and his widowed mother, exploring themes of family, grief and generational trauma.

"I am excited to continue collaborating with local talent and organisations to bring our stories to the global stage," she added.

For Chia, authenticity and respect are paramount when amplifying underrepresented voices.

"When I created a documentary for Architects of Diversity Malaysia's Sekolah Semua movement, I felt privileged people entrusted me with their stories. It is my responsibility to ensure individuals and communities are represented how they would like to be."

This involves close collaboration and creating space for people to guide the narrative.

"People and their well-being always come first. This approach often leads to the best projects because they come from a place of genuine connection and respect," she emphasised.

### Advice for aspiring filmmakers

To aspiring Malaysian filmmakers aiming to break into the international scene, Chia offers words of encouragement: "Do not let the status quo deter you from sharing the stories you want to tell. Find a group of supportive people who share similar values and are willing to ride the challenges with you. The rest will follow."

Her journey serves as an inspiring example of how personal narratives, grounded in cultural authenticity, can resonate universally.

As she continues to craft films that bridge barriers and celebrate connections, Chia is undoubtedly a voice to watch in the world of storytelling.

# DeepSeek is Chinese alternative to ChatGPT

➤ New player in AI field will be able to generate content in Mandarin

**N**EW developments and models in artificial intelligence (AI) seem to be coming thick and fast these days. DeepSeek, a language model developed by a team of Chinese researchers and engineers, is making a name for itself in the increasingly competitive field of AI, being touted as a potential rival to ChatGPT.

Like ChatGPT, DeepSeek relies on models trained on huge volumes of text data. Its main strength lies in its ability to understand and generate content in Mandarin and other Asian languages, thus meeting a need often neglected by Western models.

Compared with the American benchmark of OpenAI, DeepSeek stands out for its specialisation in Asian languages but that is not all. Another distinction is that its latest model V3 is entirely available as open source, encouraging international collaboration and innovation. This approach enables developers to adapt it to their specific use cases. Finally, DeepSeek has a much lower cost than the competition, for more data processed per second.

Among its capabilities, DeepSeek can translate texts and generate content by answering a multitude of questions. It can also code.

While intelligent conversational agents are popping up everywhere, such as ChatGPT, Gemini, Claude and Mistral to name only the most famous, DeepSeek presents itself as an original alternative, which can be tested now. - ETX Studio



The latest model of DeepSeek is available as open source. - PEXELSPIC

## OpenAI outlines plans of becoming for-profit company

**CHATGPT** maker OpenAI laid out plans last month for a new corporate structure shifting away from control by a non-profit - an issue of contention for the artificial intelligence (AI) trailblazer.

OpenAI was founded as a non-profit in 2015 and has since switched to a capped for-profit enterprise allowing for a limited level of money making.

But it has been seeking to become a for-profit public benefit corporation (PBC), which could attract more investment.

In a blog post, the company said it plans to restructure as a PBC, which requires the company to balance interests of shareholder, stakeholder and public benefit in its decision making.

"It will enable us to raise the necessary capital with conventional terms like others in this space," OpenAI added.

It said it needs to raise more capital than imagined, citing the hundreds and billions of dollars that major firms are now putting into AI development.

"Investors want to back us but at this scale of capital, need conventional equity and less structural bespoke-ness."

Currently, its structure does not allow the board to directly consider the interests of those who would finance its mission.

The structure also does not enable the non-profit to easily do more than control the for-profit, the company said.

With the restructuring, the PBC will

control OpenAI's operations and business. - AFPPIC



control OpenAI's operations and business.

Its non-profit arm will build up a team to pursue charitable initiatives in areas such as health care.

OpenAI is under high scrutiny as an AI powerhouse, reaching a staggering US\$157 billion (RM703 billion) valuation in recent times.

The company, led by Sam Altman, has become one of the most successful startups in Silicon Valley history, propelled to headlines in 2022 when it released the generative AI chatbot ChatGPT.

But, its corporate set-up imploded in late 2023 when the board fired Altman. Staff rebelled and Altman was eventually reinstated while those involved in his ouster left the company.

Alarmed by the situation, new investors have demanded that OpenAI become a more classic for-profit outfit within two years.

Its restructuring efforts will likely face obstacles, with Elon Musk reportedly asking a US court to stop OpenAI from converting into a for-profit enterprise. - AFP



The research warns the intention economy will treat human motivations as the new currency. — PEXELSPIC

## UK study warns of perils in AI-driven 'intention economy'

**CONVERSATIONAL** artificial intelligence (AI) tools may soon influence users' decision making in a new commercial frontier called the "intention economy", University of Cambridge researchers warned in a paper published last month.

The research argued the potentially lucrative yet troubling marketplace emerging for digital signals of intent could influence everything from buying movie tickets to voting for political candidates.

Our increasing familiarity with chatbots, digital tutors and other so-called anthropomorphic AI agents is helping enable this new array of persuasive technologies, it added.

It will see AI combine knowledge of our online habits with a growing ability to know the user and anticipate their desires and build new levels of trust and understanding, the paper's two co-authors noted.

Left unchecked, that could allow for social manipulation on an industrial scale, the pair, from Cambridge's Leverhulme Centre for the Future of Intelligence, argued in the paper published in the *Harvard Data Science Review*.

It characterised how this emergent sector, dubbed the "intention economy", will profile users' attention and communicative styles, connecting them to patterns of behaviour and choices they make.

"AI tools are already being developed to elicit, infer, collect, record, understand, forecast and ultimately, manipulate and commodify human plans and purposes," co-author Yaqub Chaudhary said.

The new AI will rely on so-called Large Language Models to target a user's cadence, politics, vocabulary, age, gender, online history and even preferences for flattery and ingratiation, according to the research.

That would be linked with other emerging AI tech that bids to achieve a given aim, such as selling a cinema trip or steer conversations towards particular platforms, advertisers, businesses and even political organisations.

Co-author Jonnie Penn warned: "Unless regulated, the intention economy will treat your motivations as the new currency. It will be a gold rush for those who target, steer and sell human intentions."

"We should start to consider the likely impact such a marketplace would have on human aspiration, including free and fair elections, free press and fair market competition. — AFP

## Rollout of Wi-Fi 8 expected in 2028

**THE** next generation of Wi-Fi 8, the IEEE 802.11bn standard is set to up the ante when it comes to wireless connectivity, making reliability a key priority rather than just hitting a new high in the speed race.

While the most optimistic pundits are already talking about theoretical data rates of up to 100 Gbps, which is twice the highest speed of Wi-Fi 7, the main aim of this new standard will be to make wireless connections as reliable as possible, regardless of the number of devices connected simultaneously.

With its focus on stability and intelligent spectrum management, Wi-Fi 8 is designed to respond to the proliferation of demands for connections, from high-definition streaming to

online games and virtual reality. The major innovation will lie in the ability of the Wi-Fi standard to maintain constant signal quality, even when it is most in demand. Wi-Fi 8 also promises better latency, which is crucial for video games and virtual and/or augmented reality.

Rollout is expected in 2028 in an optimal scenario. Wi-Fi 8 will be backward-compatible with its predecessors, allowing for older and newer devices to communicate but global equipment upgrades will be necessary to fully take advantage of its benefits.

Meanwhile Wi-Fi 7 is a technology full of promise that is only now starting to be deployed on a widespread basis. The first



Wi-Fi 8 focuses on reliability of wireless connection. — PEXELSPIC

compatible devices appeared in 2024 but it will be a few years before this new standard is widely adopted. To enjoy the benefits of Wi-Fi 7, you need a compatible router. It is advisable to choose the latest devices and check their compatibility with this standard before buying. — ETX Studio



Muhammad Adam (left) and Putri Qayreen showing their certificates with their mother Siti Paspas (centre).

## Prepping for STEM future

**SIBLINGS** Muhammad Adam Mikhael Azziddin, 11, and his sister Putri Qayreen Sofea Azziddin, 9, from Kajang, secured 15th and 18th positions at the MakeX Robotics Competition Global Final in Shenzhen, China, held early last month.

The two, who are studying at Sekolah Kebangsaan Kajang, received Skill Master Award certificates from the MakeX Robotics Competition Committee.

The Jazro Robotics Academy students competed individually in Session 2 of the Inspire Smart Logistics category, which had a total of 264 participants from various countries.

In the Inspire Category, the contestants completed three missions, requiring them to use a robot to transport a cube in a certain direction using a Bluetooth controller.

However, these tasks were only revealed at the time of competition. Participants were

judged according to the number of points collected and the time taken to complete the missions.

"We are proud of the achievements of our children, we never imagined such an achievement. When we first enrolled them in Jazro classes, we saw it as an opportunity to learn. Now, we see it as a pathway to a bright future in the field of technology that can be explored," said their mother Siti Paspas Mohamad Sofa.

Jazro Robotics Academy is a robotics education company that aims to develop digital talent in science, technology, engineering and mathematics (STEM) fields.

"It represents the potential of young Malaysians when given the right educational opportunities.

"These positions prove with the right guidance and exposure, our children can compete internationally. The recognition achieved in Shenzhen also reflects Malaysia's growing progress in STEM education," said Jazro CEO Dzulfarqish Zainuddin.

Previously, Muhammad Adam was crowned the champion of MakeX Malaysia in the Inspire Category and his sister Putri Qayreen won second place in the same category, which qualified them to compete in the global final.

## Apple to pay RM427m settlement amid Siri spying claims

**APPLE** has agreed to pay US\$95 million (RM427 million) to settle a lawsuit accusing its digital assistant Siri of listening in on users' private conversations.

The proposed settlement detailed in a court filing accessed last week came with Apple holding firm it did nothing wrong.

"Apple has at all times denied and continues to deny any and all alleged wrongdoing and liability," said the tech titan said in the proposed settlement, which requires a judge's approval to be finalised.

A class action lawsuit filed five years ago accused Siri of listening in on private conversations of people

with iPhones, iPads, HomePods or other Apple devices enhanced with the digital assistant.

The California-based tech giant has made user privacy a big part of its brand image and one of the reasons it tightly controls its ecosystem of hardware and software.

Talk captured by unintended Siri

activation were obtained by Apple and perhaps, even shared with third parties, according to the suit.

A proposed settlement fund of US\$95 million would be used to pay no more than US\$20 per Siri device to US owners who had private conversations



captured without permission, the settlement indicated.

The agreement also required Apple to confirm it has deleted any overheard talk and make user choices clear when it comes to voice data gathered to improve Siri. — AFP



BY YASMIN ZULRAEZ

# High-speed adventure

➤ Thrilling action-packed sequel that stays true to its roots while pushing franchise forward

**D**IRECTED by Jeff Fowler, *Sonic the Hedgehog 3* is a satisfying and action-packed follow-up that feels like a love letter to fans of the video games and previous two films. With returning favourites, thrilling new characters and a plot that ties together the heart of the franchise, this instalment does not just meet expectations, it rockets past them.

**Familiar formula that still feels fresh**

By now, the *Sonic* movies have established a winning formula: a mix of humour, heart and high-octane action that appeals to audiences of all ages. *Sonic the Hedgehog 3* sticks to this recipe while introducing enough twists and new faces to keep things fresh.

The film brings back Sonic (voiced by Ben Schwartz) along with his trusty sidekicks, Tails (Colleen O'Shaughnessey) and Knuckles (Idris Elba), who have settled into life with Tom and Maddie Wachowski (James Marsden and Tika Sumpter).

But the peace of Green Hills is soon disrupted by the arrival of Shadow the Hedgehog, a new adversary with mysterious powers and a tragic backstory, voiced to perfection by Keanu Reeves. Reeves's Shadow steals the show with a performance that balances menace and vulnerability, turning the character into the most compelling addition to the series yet.

**Movie's MVP**

Let us address the obvious: Reeves as Shadow is a game-changer. From his first on-screen moment, Reeves commands attention with his deep, brooding voice and an intensity that makes Shadow feel like the most dangerous threat Sonic and his friends have ever faced.

Reeves brings depth to Shadow, making him more than just a villain. His performance adds layers to the character, hinting at a tragic past and motivations that go beyond simple evil. Fans of the games will appreciate how faithful his portrayal is while



Reeves's Shadow steals the show with a performance that balances menace and vulnerability.



*Sonic the Hedgehog 3* balances its action and drama with plenty of humour.

newcomers will find themselves drawn to the complexity he brings to the role.

**Action-packed and full of heart**

*Sonic the Hedgehog 3* is packed with exhilarating action sequences that are as fun as they are visually stunning. From high-speed chases in Tokyo to battles in outer space, the film never lets up. The addition of Shadow as an adversary raises the stakes, with every encounter between him and Team Sonic feeling like a true test of their abilities.

But, the movie does not sacrifice heart for spectacle. The bond between Sonic, Tails and Knuckles remains the story's emotional core, with moments of humour and

camaraderie that remind viewers why they love these characters. Tom and Maddie also get their moments to shine, adding a grounded, human element to the story.

**Nostalgia-fuelled plot**

The plot delivers exactly what fans want: a nostalgic callback to the games with enough emotional weight to keep things engaging.

Shadow's backstory, tied to Gerald and Maria Robotnik, adds depth and gives the story stakes beyond just another villain-of-the-week scenario.

The film also does a great job of weaving in fan-favourite elements from the games, from the Chaos Emeralds to the introduction of Amy Rose in a mid-credits scene that will have fans buzzing.

As with the previous films, *Sonic the Hedgehog 3* balances its action and drama with plenty of humour. Schwartz's Sonic is as quippy as ever and the dynamic between Tails and Knuckles provides plenty of laughs. Even Shadow gets a few dry one-liners though they are delivered with his trademark deadpan intensity.

Some jokes feel a bit forced, especially during the film's slower moments but for the most part, the humour lands, keeping the tone light and fun.



Come for the action, stay for the laughs and leave with a renewed love for the popular characters.



Carrey delivers an amazing performance, holding dual characters as Dr Robotnik and his grandfather Professor Robotnik.

**Dazzling visuals and rocking soundtrack**

Visually, the movie is a feast for the eyes. The blend of CGI and live-action is smooth and the action sequences are choreographed with a level of creativity that keeps them exciting. The use of colour and lighting, particularly during scenes involving the Chaos Emeralds, adds a sense of wonder to the film.

The soundtrack complements the action, featuring a cinematic score and needle-drops of iconic Sonic themes. Fans will appreciate the musical nods to the games while newcomers will enjoy the high-energy beats that match the movie's pace.

*Sonic the Hedgehog 3* is not without its imperfections. The pacing can feel uneven at times, with the middle act dragging slightly as it juggles multiple subplots. The human characters while likeable, occasionally feel like they are sidelined in favour of the larger-than-life hedgehog drama. While the humour is mostly on point, a few jokes aimed at younger audiences might elicit groans from older viewers.

**Fitting conclusion to trilogy**

*Sonic the Hedgehog 3* wraps up its central storyline in a satisfying way, giving long-time fans plenty of payoff while setting the stage for future instalments. The mid-credits scene, in particular, teases an exciting direction for the franchise, ensuring audiences will leave the cinema buzzing with anticipation.

For fans of the series, this movie is everything they could have hoped for and more. For newcomers, it is an entertaining and accessible introduction to a world that is only growing in scope and ambition.

*Sonic the Hedgehog 3* is a high-energy sequel that delivers on its promise of action, humour and heart. While not without its flaws, the film's strong performances, particularly from Reeves and its faithfulness to the source material make it a must-watch for fans and newcomers alike.

Come for the action, stay for the laughs and leave with a renewed love for one of gaming's most iconic characters.

*Sonic the Hedgehog 3* is proof this franchise still has plenty of speed left in the tank.



(From left) Tom (Marsden) and Maddie (Sumpter) add a human element to the tale.



(From left) The bond between Knuckles (Elba), Sonic (Schwartz) and Tails (O'Shaughnessey) remains the emotional core of the film.

**DIRECTOR:**  
 Jeff Fowler

**CAST:** Jim Carrey, Ben Schwartz, James Marsden, Tika Sumpter, Idris Elba, Keanu Reeves

**E-VALUE** 8

**ACTING** 7

**PLOT** 7



# Real-life inspiration behind Squid Game

▶ Labour strike in South Korea that caused casualties is heartbeat of film



Squid Game 2 is available to stream on Netflix since last month. – AFP/PIIC

A factory turned into a battlefield, riot police armed with tasers and an activist who spent 100 days atop a chimney – the unrest that inspired Netflix’s most successful show ever has all the hallmarks of a TV drama.

This month sees the release of the second season of *Squid Game*, a dystopian vision of South Korea, in which people compete in deadly versions of traditional children’s games for a massive cash prize.

While the show itself is a work of fiction, *Squid Game*’s director and writer Hwang Dong-hyuk said the experiences of the main character Gi-hun, a laid-off worker, were inspired by the violent Ssangyong strikes in 2009.

“I wanted to show (an) ordinary middle-class person can fall to the bottom of the economic ladder overnight,” he said, referencing the realities of the current



The dystopian realities of *Squid Game* mirrors the real world. – PIC FROM INSTAGRAM @SQUIDGAMENETFLIX

sociopolitical climate. In May 2009, Ssangyong, a struggling car giant taken over by a

consortium of banks and private investors, announced it was laying off more than 2,600 people or nearly 40% of its workforce.

That was the beginning of an occupation of the factory and a 77-day strike that ended in clashes between strikers armed with slingshots and steel pipes, and riot police wielding rubber bullets and tasers. Many union members were severely beaten and some were jailed.

#### Stress and suicides

The conflict did not end there. Five years later, union leader Lee Chang-kun held a sit-in for 100 days on top of one of the factory’s chimneys to protest a sentence in favour of Ssangyong against the strikers.

He was supplied with food from a basket attached to a rope by

supporters and endured hallucinations of a tent rope transformed into a writhing snake.

Some who experienced the unrest struggled to discuss *Squid Game* because of the trauma they endured, said Lee.

The repercussions of the strike, compounded by protracted legal battles, caused significant financial and mental strain for workers and their families, resulting in around 30 deaths by suicide and stress-related issues, divulged Lee.

“Many have lost their lives. People had to suffer for too long,” he said.

He vividly remembers the police helicopters circling overhead, creating intense winds that ripped away workers’ raincoats. Lee said he felt he could not give up.

“We were seen as incompetent breadwinners and outdated labour activists who had lost their minds.

Police kept beating us even after we fell unconscious – this happened at our workplace and it was broadcast for so many to see,” he said.

Lee said he had been moved by scenes in the first season of *Squid Game*, in which Gi-hun struggles not to betray his fellow competitors.

But he wished the show had spurred real-life change for workers in a country marked by economic inequality, tense industrial relations and deeply polarised politics.

“Despite being widely discussed and consumed, it is disappointing we have not channelled these conversations into more beneficial outcomes,” he said.

#### Shadow of state violence

The success of *Squid Game* in 2021 left him feeling empty and frustrated.

“At the time, it felt like the story of the Ssangyong workers had been reduced to a commodity in the series,” Lee explained.

*Squid Game*, the streaming platform’s most-watched series of all time, is seen as embodying the country’s rise to a global cultural powerhouse, part of the Korean wave, alongside Oscar-winning film *Parasite* and K-pop stars such as BTS.

But its second season comes as the Asian democracy finds itself embroiled in some of its worst political turmoil in decades, triggered by conservative President Yoon Suk Yeol’s failed bid to impose martial law in December last year.

Yoon has since been impeached and suspended from duties pending a ruling by the Constitutional Court.

That declaration of martial law risked sending the Korean wave into the abyss, around 3,000 people in the film industry, including *Parasite* director Bong Joon-ho, said in a letter following Yoon’s shocking decision.

University of Oslo professor (Korean studies) Vladimir Tikhonov said some of South Korea’s most successful cultural products highlight state and capitalist violence.

“It is a noteworthy and interesting phenomenon – we still live in the shadow of state violence and this state violence is a recurrent theme in highly successful cultural products.” – AFP

## Misfits Festival makes Malaysian debut

ELECTRONIC music sensation the Misfits Festival is making its way to Malaysia for the first time at Surf Beach in Sunway Lagoon on April 26.

Organised by Future Sound Asia and conceptualised by DJ Ben Nicky, Misfits Festival Malaysia is an electrifying night of beats, visuals and immersive experiences.

From sold-out events across cities such as Bristol, Glasgow and Edinburgh to drawing a crowd of 22,000 at Belsonic in Belfast, Misfits Festival is celebrated for its performances and music experiences.

Ben was hailed by American DJ and music producer Diplo as the leader of a new movement and praised by Armin van Buuren as one of the hardest-working DJs in the industry. Known for his genre-defying sets spanning 125–200bpm, Ben has headlined festivals such as Tomorrowland, Creamfields and EDC Las Vegas.

With collaborations featuring Calvin Harris, Ellie Goulding and David Guetta, Ben has cemented his status as a global



Ben is known for his genre-defying sets.

EDM powerhouse.

The Malaysian edition promises the same experience, featuring a lineup of international

and local artistes, that will be revealed soon. Guests can look forward to vibrant visuals, high-energy performances and an

atmosphere of unity that has made Misfits Festival a standout event.

Tickets are on sale, ranging from RM170 to RM350.



# Blues must finish games off: Maresca

BY RACHEL STEINBERG

**CHELSEA** boss Enzo Maresca blamed a lack of clinical finishing after Jean-Philippe Mateta's late equaliser salvaged a 1-1 draw for Crystal Palace at Selhurst Park.

Cole Palmer opened the scoring in the 14th minute of a first half dominated by Maresca's visiting Blues, who squandered a number of chances to pad their lead before the Frenchman levelled eight minutes from time.

Fourth-placed Chelsea, once touted as title contenders, are now winless in their last four Premier League meetings and have just one point more than Newcastle, who edged closer to the Champions League places with victory over Tottenham.

Maresca said: "Two weeks ago, three weeks ago, we were talking about the title race. We knew that Newcastle, Aston Villa will be there, City will be, for sure there."

"So it's for me, it's not about the table. It's just about seeing how we can improve things. Today, the performance for me was very good on the ball, off the ball."

"But this moment of the season, I know that is going to happen in any season for any team, that you have some moment that you are not able to win games."

"The reason why? I think every game is different. Sometimes it's for one reason, sometimes it's for different reasons."

"But today, if I have to decide the reason why we didn't win the game, I think it's just try to be clinical when you have the chance to kill the game."

"If you continue to be open, open, open at the end, you're going to concede."

Palace boss Oliver Glasner said his side probably showed Chelsea too much respect early on, but was pleased by their determination to reverse their fortunes after the break.

"I think at the end it's a deserved point," he said. "With all (Chelsea's) quality, it is just not possible to defend every situation and with every chance they're creating with every ball you lose, the confidence goes down."

"That's normal, but really, really, I'm really pleased with this, with the character not to lose your belief stay in the game, and knowing that we can come back."

"We have to show that we can play in the same way we played, let's say, the last 60 minutes, over the whole period, and then it's possible to win against a team like Chelsea." – The Independent

# Emery stresses importance of Villa win

BY JONATHAN VEAL

**ASTON VILLA** boss Unai Emery knew his side had to beat Leicester if they wanted to keep their top-four challenge on course.

Villa's quest for a second successive year in the Champions League has been hamstrung by inconsistency this season, but they kicked off 2025 with an important three points.

Leon Bailey chose a good time to score his first goal of the season 14 minutes from time after Ross Barkley's opener had been quickly cancelled out by Stephy Mavididi.

Victory moved Unai Emery's men to within four points of fourth-placed Chelsea as they now break for FA Cup action.

"We needed those three points after we drew at home with Brighton and we are challenging to be in the top 10, top eight," he said.

"The League is very difficult because a lot of teams are performing very well. To

win today was fantastic.

"How we achieved those points as well, in 90 minutes struggling. Leicester competed very well, in the first half we didn't perform like we wanted."

"We didn't create clear chances, so to get those three points is fantastic. We had to be patient and find a solution and we did it."

Boss Ruud van Nistelrooy is happy with the progress his side is making, though knows they have to cut out the mistakes.

"I can repeat myself from last week, decent performance but through our own mistakes we could have done better," he said.

"These are standard situations we can handle better. In the Premier League these situations are punished without blinking your eyes."

"That's the disappointing bit because over the 95 minutes we were calm and composed. It was a very, very stable performance." – The Independent

**322 Notices**

**DALAM MAHKAMAH MAJISTRAT DI GEORGETOWN**  
DALAM NEGERI PULAU PINANG  
GUBAHAN SIVIL NO.  
PA-A7ZINCVC-881-10/2024

ANTARA

**PUBLIC BANK BERHAD**  
(NO. SYARIAH 19601000672  
(8463-H)) ... PLAINTIF

DAN

1. TIEN LOONG INTERIOR DESIGN  
SON BHD  
(NO. SYARIAH 201301010404  
(1404246-A))

2. ALFRED TEH HANN WEN  
(NO. K.P. 68025-07-5513)

3. LOH KOK GIN  
(NO. K.P. 650213-07-5503)  
... DEFENDAN-DEFENDAN

Kepada:-

ALFRED TEH HANN WEN  
(NO. K.P. 68025-07-5513)  
H2-0, Rumah Pangsa Padang Tembak  
11400 Ayer Itam, Pulau Pinang

dan/atau

ALFRED TEH HANN WEN  
(NO. K.P. 68025-07-5513)  
20, Lorong Sekolah  
11600 Jelutong Pulau Pinang

LOH KOK GIN  
(NO. K.P. 650213-07-5503)  
Blok 16-7-5, Seri Nibong,  
Jalan Tun Dr Awang,  
11900 Bayan Lepas  
Pulau Pinang.

dan/atau

LOH KOK GIN  
(NO. K.P. 650213-07-5503)  
20, Lorong Sekolah  
11600 Jelutong Pulau Pinang

**AMBIK PERHATIAN** bahawa satu Writ bermeterai bertarikh 29-10-2024 telah dikeluarkan ke atas kamu dalam Mahkamah Majistret di Georgetown, Pulau Pinang dan diperintahkan bahawa kamu bersetia dengan tuntutan yang tertera dalam Petisyen No. PA-A7ZINCVC-881-10/2024 oleh Public Bank Berhad yang mempunyai alamat di 33, 35, 37, Jalan Pantai Jerjak 13, 11900 Sungai Nibong, Pulau Pinang dan diperintahkan bahawa Writ bermeterai tersebut bersama dengan Petisyen Tuntutan bertarikh 29-10-2024 disampaikan kepada kamu secara penyampaian ganti dengan menampalkan kertas-kertas kauesa bersama dengan Perintah untuk Penyampaian Ganti bermeterai di Papan Notis Mahkamah Majistret di Georgetown, Pulau Pinang, dan pada satu bahagian yang jelas kelihatan di alamat terakhir Defendan yang diketahui iaitu H2-0, Rumah Pangsa Padang Tembak, 11400 Ayer Itam, Pulau Pinang dan/atau Blok 16-7-5, Seri Nibong, Jalan Tun Dr Awang, 11900 Bayan Lepas, Pulau Pinang dan/atau 20, Lorong Sekolah, 11600 Jelutong, Pulau Pinang dan memastikan satu klen dalam suatu surat khabar tempatan Bahasa Inggeris iaitu "The Sun" untuk satu (1) terbitan dan bahawa penyampaian dan pengiklanan itu hendaklah disifatkan sebagai penyampaian yang sempurna dan cukup bagi Writ tersebut dalam tempoh masa tujuh (7) hari dari tarikh akhir penyampaian.

Jika kamu bersetia untuk membea tanggakan tersebut kamu mestilah hadir sama ada secara sendiri atau melalui peguambela kamu di hadapan Mahkamah Majistret di Georgetown, Pulau Pinang pada 09-01-2025 jam pukul 9.00 pagi. Jika kamu ingkar hadir sedemikian, satu pengiklanan hakim dibuat terhadap kamu oleh Mahkamah.

Bertarikh 06 Januari 2025

L. L.

Peguambela Plaintif

**NOTIS** ini dikeluarkan oleh Tien Weng & Loh, Peguambela Plaintif yang beramat di 44, Jalan Cantonment, 10350 Georgetown, Pulau Pinang.

# Ange furious after defeat

Postecoglou says Spurs would have beaten Newcastle on 'fair and even playing ground'

BY JAMIE BRAIDWOOD

**AFUMING** Ange Postecoglou said his depleted Tottenham side would have beaten Newcastle had the match taken place on "an even and fair playing ground" after the visitors scored a controversial equaliser in their 2-1 win.

Spurs remain with just one win in eight Premier League games after Newcastle came from behind to climb into fifth in the table.

The hosts were without several first-team players due to illness or injury and were forced to field a second-choice defence and third-choice goalkeeper, but battled well and had chances to claim a point late on.

Postecoglou said he was "proud" of his team's "outstanding" efforts but was furious with Newcastle's equaliser in the first half, which came just two minutes and 20 seconds after Dominic Solanke's early opener. Tottenham lost possession playing out from defence but the ball struck Newcastle midfielder Joelinton's hand in the build-up as Anthony Gordon went on to score.

The incident was reviewed by VAR and the Premier



League Match Centre explained that Joelinton's arm was "by his side, in a natural position and the contact was accidental".

Postecoglou was further aggrieved when potential handballs from Tino Livramento in the box and Dan Burn, who was on a yellow card, went unpunished.

When asked about the incident leading to Gordon's goal, Postecoglou said: "I know what everyone wants me to say. But all I will say is on another day, on a fair and even playing ground we would have won that game, it's as simple as that."

"Don't keep asking me about the decision. If you have no opinion about it, that's fine. I know what my opinion is and as I said, if that was a different day and it was an even and fair playing ground, we would have won that game."

Postecoglou added he was "angry that football wasn't what denied us getting the rewards we deserved today" and in further cryptic comment to *TNT SPORTS* said "that's the way they want to do things".

"Hugely proud of the players - outstanding considering the situation we are in", the Australian said. "We deserved to win that game. All things being equal we would have."

Newcastle manager Eddie Howe, who saw his team win a fifth consecutive Premier League match, admitted that the ball did strike Joelinton's hand in the build up to Gordon's equaliser and said the handball rules were "slightly unclear".

"There's no denying the ball hit Joe's hand or arm but I'm not sure of the rules," Howe said. "For me the rules are slightly unclear. "I don't know where the cut off point is. Of course it hit his hand, I cannot deny that. But from that point onwards I thought it was a really good goal." – The Independent

Tottenham manager Ange Postecoglou reacts in anger during the English Premier League match against Newcastle.

– REUTERS/SPIC

# Australia win gripping fifth India Test

**AUSTRALIA** clinched a knife-edge fifth Test against India in Sydney by six wickets to seal a riveting series 3-1 yesterday and book their place in the World Test Championship final.

India were dismissed 45 minutes into the morning session of day three for 157, adding just 16 to their overnight 141-6 with the irrepressible Scott Boland ending with 6-45 and 10 wickets for the match.

Set 162 to win, the hosts reached the target before tea against an attack missing injured strike bowler Jasprit Bumrah to regain the Border-Gavaskar trophy for the first time since 2014-15.

Australia lost three wickets before lunch to leave the Test finely poised, including Steve Smith who agonisingly fell just one short of becoming only the 15th player and fourth Australian to reach 10,000 Test runs.

But Usman Khawaja hit a composed 41 before Travis Head (34 not out) and debutant Beau Webster (39 not out) steered them home.

"This is unreal, this (a series win against India) is one that a few of us didn't have. It's been an amazing series... it's really lived up to

all the hype," said Australia skipper Pat Cummins.

"I'm immensely proud. I love playing with these guys, they are such a special group. I feel privileged to have this job and what we have been able to achieve together. Pretty satisfied at the moment."

Indian pace spearhead and skipper Bumrah, who has been dealing with a back issue, batted briefly when his team resumed after bowling just one over and leaving the field on Saturday.

But in a huge setback the 31-year-old did not appear again, leaving Mohammed Siraj and Prasidh Krishna to lead the bowling attack, with Virat Kohli in charge.

"A little frustrating but sometimes you have to respect your body and you can't fight your body," said Bumrah. "The whole series was well fought," he added.

"Younger players have come in, and the learnings will help us in future. They have gained a lot of experience and they will go from strength to strength. It is all about adapting and learning." – AFP

# Henry, Young power NZ to win over Sri Lanka

**MATT HENRY** claimed four wickets and Will Young scored an unbeaten 90 yesterday as New Zealand coasted to a nine-wicket win over Sri Lanka in the first one-day international.

The tourists never recovered after slumping to 23-4 inside 10 overs, dismissed in the 44th over for 178 after being asked to bat in cold, windy Wellington.

In response, Young was barely flustered during a fluent 86-ball knock, putting on 93 for the opening stand with Rachin Ravindra, who scored 45.

Mark Chapman was not out 29 as the home side reached the target from 26.2 overs in an emphatic start to the three-match series.

Coming off a productive Test series against England, Henry was a

handful with the new ball in seam-friendly conditions, taking the key wicket of opener Pathum Nissanka for nine in the fifth over.

The relentless seamer returned to help mop up the tail, finishing with 4-19 off 10 overs.

Seamers Nathan Smith and Jacob Duffy snared two wickets each, capitalising on bouncy conditions offering some sideways movement at the Basin Reserve.

Captain Mitchell Santner praised the patience shown by his pace attack.

"The boys up front did the job with the ball but when there's movement there, you're expected to take wickets," Santner said.

"We were patient, especially at the start, and were able to chip our wickets out that way. All four seamers did a hell of a job."



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**BOURNEMOUTH** head coach Andoni Iraola deflected praise onto his players after leading his side to a club-record eighth Premier League game unbeaten to move within three points of the Champions League places.

Everton were beaten 1-0 at the Vitality Stadium thanks to a wonderful volleyed goal 13 minutes from time from David Brooks, who leapt into the air to send Milos Kerkez's cross sailing beyond Jordan Pickford.

The goal was the antithesis of an insipid Everton display as Sean Dyche saw his team fail to register a shot on target in 90 minutes, the prospect of a relegation scrap seeming unavoidable on this evidence as their dreadful run extended to one goal in their last five matches.

## Dyche frustrated as relegation battle looms

**EVERTON** boss Sean Dyche admitted frustration after yesterday's 1-0 defeat at Bournemouth.

The Toffees winless streak stretched to five matches, leaving them in 16th place in the Premier League, just two points above the relegation zone:

"It was a tight game that they edged, as they have been doing this season. They've had a very good season, they are a very strong side, particularly here.

"I thought the first half was a close affair, but we weren't where we wanted to be so I made changes for the second half.

"I thought we were stronger in the second half and we got into key areas and, as has been the challenge since I've been at the club, finding that last moment when people pass when they could shoot, or the final cross and the final finish, we don't find that. So it's very frustrating. It was a tight game that went against us."

Dyche, whose attacking woes were compounded when striker Armando Broja was forced off injured in the first half, reflected on yet another blank drawn by his shot-shy team.

"We need to change the amount of shots we get on target," he said. "We've certainly been trying for two years to do that.

"It's very difficult to find players who have that cutting edge, ones who can score a goal.

"It's the reality. I didn't know the reality when I first got here, it has shifted significantly. But these are the realities.

"This is the squad, these are the players we've got, this is trying to constantly hold players into a more offensive unit whilst defending properly.

"No assurances of any kind. Every time that whistle blows, no manager can assure a result goes your way." – The Independent/Agencies

## Iraola salutes unbeaten run

For Bournemouth, the unlikely target of a first-ever European qualification looks increasingly within reach.

"I don't play, the important part is the ones who were on the pitch," said Iraola. "I'm happy because it's not easy to go eight games unbeaten in the Premier League.

"Now we are playing four teams that are ahead of us in the top five, it's going to be more difficult to keep the run going. But at least we want to keep the performance level and give us a chance against anyone."

Bournemouth's credentials will be tested on that run which sees them face Chelsea, Nottingham Forest, Newcastle and Liverpool but should they still sit within striking distance of the top four come the start of February, supporters will rightly start to dream.

"We really deserved this one," said Iraola. "We were controlling the game since the beginning, we knew against Everton it's difficult to score because they have a good keeper and good centrebacks.

"We had the patience. Probably we should have scored earlier. I think everyone watching the game

was feeling that the goal was coming."

A goal ought indeed to have arrived earlier. Dango Ouattara was denied by Pickford from close range in the first half while the goalkeeper was alert to produce an excellent stop from Justin Kluivert, who linked up beautifully with Antoine Semenyo.

Everton, intent on nothing greater than leaving with a stalemate, were made to pay for their lack of ambition when Brooks guided Kerkez's cross into the corner with Jarrad Branthwaite perhaps at fault for failing to get his head on the cross.

"I think everyone sees the goal and thinks he wanted to put the ball exactly where he puts it," said Iraola. – The Independent

# Back on track

Guardiola happy as City beat Hammers but 'performance not good'

BY ANDY HAMPSON

**PEP GUARDIOLA** welcomed the win but felt his Manchester City side were still far from their best after beating West Ham 4-1 yesterday.

Erling Haaland struck twice as the champions rediscovered their goalscoring touch at the Etihad Stadium to secure back-to-back Premier League victories for the first time since October.

The result took more heat off City after they claimed only their second win in 14 games in all competitions at Leicester last week, but Guardiola does not feel his team are back to their old selves yet.

The City manager said: "We saw in many years our level and we are not at our level. We won, I am so happy and it helps us.

"But you judge results, (when) our performance was not good.

"I'm so happy for the guys, and the work ethic, but in the first minutes deserved to be 0-1, 0-2 and we were lucky with the first goal.

"We are a strong team (when) we run a lot and have the composure, but now we

don't have it.

"I'm very pleased for the result but you cannot ask me if the old City is back. If you saw the game, we are not.

"You saw many times during the years what we have done with the opponents."

West Ham spurned two gilt-edged chances to take

the lead before City went ahead when Vladimir Coufal turned Savinho's cross into his own net.

Phil Foden got on the scoresheet for the hosts too but their best player was in-form winger Savinho, who also set up both of Haaland's goals.

Guardiola said: "Has a lot to improve - he's not aggressive

enough without the ball, he's a little bit soft in many departments, but right now has something special and brilliant that helps the team a lot.

"He 'scored' a goal, was a bit lucky, but the two assists were brilliant. I'm so happy for him and he deserves to play."

West Ham's defeat, coming after a 5-0 thrashing at Liverpool, did nothing to ease the pressure on manager Julen Lopetegui, especially with his predecessor David Moyes spotted in the crowd.

The former Real Madrid and Spain boss could, however, bemoan his luck after early missed chances by Mohammed Kudus and Tomas Soucek, while Crystall Palace's Summerville was harshly penalised for a foul when clean through.

Lopetegui, whose side did manage a consolation through

Niclas Füllkrug, said: "It is not easy to explain the match. We deserved more in my opinion. A lot of little details worked against us.

"Not only did we not take advantage of two clear situations - we have to do better - but after they scored one goal we were very unlucky.

"We had a very clear situation with Summerville on (Manuel) Akanji. It was not a foul but the referee said foul. It was an unfair situation.

"We did very good things and positive things, but in the end it was not enough." – The Independent



Manchester City's Erling Haaland (centre) celebrates scoring his team's third goal with Savinho (right) and Josko Gvardiol. – REUTERS/SPIC

BY ANDY SIMS

**SOUTHAMPTON** boss Ivan Juric apologised to supporters after his rock-bottom side crashed to a 5-0 defeat at home to Brentford.

Saints' sorry season slumped to a new low after a brace from Bryan Mbeumo and goals from Kevin Schade, Keane Lewis-Potter and Yoane Wissa secured a first away League win of the campaign for the Bees.

The new manager bounce Southampton were looking for after replacing Russell Martin with Juric has not materialised with the team suffering a third straight defeat since the Croatian was appointed.

They remain stuck on six points from 20

matches and look not only doomed to relegation, but also in serious danger of breaking Derby's unwanted record of collecting only 11 points over an entire Premier League season.

"An extremely bad day, a really bad game," said Juric. "There was such a difference between the two teams and I'm disappointed with everything; the team, myself, everybody.

"There has just been two weeks but I expected more, that I could do more with the team.

"The players know the situation is very bad. They've been through it before and it's the same thing. But they have to stick together and try to work harder.

"Today I was thinking about one step forward

and we took three steps back. It was a really bad performance.

"In this moment it's important to concentrate, to stay focus, to work to improve ourselves. We cannot lose 5-0 at home. I feel responsible, sorry. The game it was awful. This day cannot happen anymore."

Schade fired Brentford ahead after only six minutes, but the floodgates opened after the interval when Mbeumo lashed in the second and then tucked in a penalty.

St Mary's was almost empty by the time Lewis-Potter and Wissa rubbed salt into the wounds in stoppage time.

"The away win is nice," said boss Thomas Frank.

"But when we look at the performance, I think it's one of my biggest moments with this Brentford team.

"To come down here, against Southampton, a team fighting to stay in the league with a new manager, is always difficult.

"To win in the way we did with complete control and dominance, giving nothing away, scoring five goals, I'm very pleased and proud of that.

"I spoke to the players about attitude, attitude, and to be humble, to run hard, to press hard, to defend well, to be 100% focused, and that shows what culture we have at this club." – The Independent

## Southampton manager Juric apologises after Brentford thrashing

# Real interest sparks concern

## Liverpool offer RM429m contract to Alexander-Arnold in bid to fend off Madrid

**L**IVERPOOL have reportedly tabled a whopping £78 million (RM429m) five-year contract to Trent Alexander-Arnold in an attempt to fend off interest from Real Madrid.

The Spanish giants have also put forward a similar £300,000 (RM1.65m) per week offer for the 26-year-old, with the added incentive of a

substantial signing-on fee if he joins them as a free agent in the summer.

This has left the player in a quandary, torn between staying at his boyhood club and potentially cementing his status as a Kop legend, or becoming a marquee signing for one of the world's most prestigious clubs.

Liverpool believe they have done all they can to persuade Alexander-Arnold to stay at Anfield during the prime years of his already illustrious career.

There have been no demands from the player to be made captain, as he recognises that he is the natural successor to Virgil van Dijk when the Dutchman's time as a regular first team player comes to an end, according to the *Mirror*.

Real Madrid are keen to sign him immediately and are willing to shell out £20 million (RM110m), despite the fact that Alexander-Arnold will become a Bosman free agent this year.

The right-back has remained tight-lipped about his future, sticking to a policy of privacy on contract matters, saying: "I have signed four or five contract

extensions and none of those have been played out in public - and this one won't be either."

Speaking on the *Premier League All Access Podcast*, journalist Alex Crook said that sources close to the full-back have told him that he (Alexander-Arnold) has no interest in leaving Liverpool in January.

"Obviously, there's talk in Spain that they're going to formalise an offer of around £20 million. Liverpool aren't going to sell Trent Alexander-Arnold for £20 million mid-season, not when they're competing for the Premier League and for the Champions League.

"And from what I'm told by sources close to the player, he doesn't want to leave in those circumstances either," Crook said.

"If he does go, he wants to be at the end of the season, hopefully from him, his perspective in a blaze of glory. So I don't see

Trent leaving this month.

"And I think, actually, Real Madrid have been a little bit naughty with the way that they've conducted this so publicly when Liverpool and Trent are determined to try and keep it on the low."

Liverpool are reportedly more optimistic about securing Mo Salah and Van Dijk for another two years, with their contracts due to expire.

Like their teammate, they are now free to discuss terms with overseas clubs; there's sizeable intrigue from Europe and Saudi Arabia for Salah.

However, he appears inclined to prolong his time at Liverpool if the conditions are favourable. - Express Newspapers/Agencies



Trent Alexander-Arnold

## Leaders Leeds held by Hull

**LEEDS** missed the chance to pull three points clear at the top of English football's second-tier Championship after Abu Kamara's dramatic late equaliser for Hull ensured a 3-3 draw yesterday.

Kamara opened the scoring before Ao Tanaka drew Leeds level from the edge of the penalty area early in the second half.

Further goals from Dan James and Joel Piroe looked to have given fallen English giants Leeds all three points.

But Joao Pedro gave Hull a lifeline with nine minutes to go, before Kamara was on target again in the 89th minute.

"To drive away with just one point is heartbreaking - it's an overwhelming feeling at the moment," said Leeds manager Daniel Farke.

Second-placed Burnley were left just a point behind Leeds following a 1-0 win away to Lancashire rivals Blackburn, with Zian Flemming's diving header on the hour mark proving the difference at Ewood Park.

The Claret's 17th clean sheet in the league this season enhanced their status as the meanest defence in the division, with Burnley manager Scott Parker saying: "What this team has done defensively this year (season) has been nothing short of sensational."

With only the top two at the end of

the regular season guaranteed a place in the lucrative Premier League, the race for automatic promotion intensified as third-placed Sheffield United also moved to within a point of Leeds with 26 games played after Andre Brooks' superb curling shot sealed a 2-1 win at Watford.

"It was a pretty special win and quite emotional at the end to see the players do what they've done today," said Blades boss Chris Wilder.

Elsewhere, substitute Amankwah Forson scored twice in stoppage time to earn Norwich a remarkable 2-1 win over a Coventry side managed by Frank Lampard at Carrow Road.

Cardiff bolstered their bid to beat the drop with a 1-1 draw at promotion contenders Middlesbrough, with both the matches between Swansea and West Brom and Preston and Oxford also finishing with the same scoreline.

Bristol City won 1-0 at home to Derby thanks to Luke McNally's first-half strike, while mid-table Sheffield Wednesday and Millwall shared the spoils in a 2-2 draw.

Mark Robins started life as Stoke boss with a goalless draw against basement club Plymouth, still managerless after the exit of Wayne Rooney, to leave the Potters four points above the relegation zone. - AFP

**TOTO SPORTS TOTO RESULTS**  
 DRAW NO: 5907/2025 DATE: 05/01/2025 (SUN)  
 STM LOTTERY SDN. BHD.  
 196901000090 (8426D)

**TOTO 4D PRIZE PAYMENTS GUARANTEED IN FULL**

1st Prize	<b>2010</b>
2nd Prize	<b>6674</b>
3rd Prize	<b>5618</b>

**Special**  
 5770 6873  
 5826 0960  
 2430 4712  
 1680 5305  
 4910 3527

**Consolation**  
 1525 9307  
 4931 0017  
 1876 2722  
 5625 7224  
 8383 2831

**4D JACKPOT**

Jackpot 1 **RM 9,080,580.24**

2010 6674	6674 2010
2010 5618	5618 2010
6674 5618	5618 6674

Jackpot 2 **RM 495,737.74**  
 Winning combination of any 1 of Top 3 & any 1 of Special prizes.

**4D Zodiac**

1st Prize	<b>2010</b>	+	
2nd Prize	<b>6674</b>	+	
3rd Prize	<b>5618</b>	+	<b>MONKEY</b>
4th Prize	<b>Special Prize</b>	+	
5th Prize	<b>Consolation Prize</b>	+	
6th Prize	<b>Any 4D drawn number</b>	+	

**TOTO 5D & 6D PRIZE PAYMENTS GUARANTEED IN FULL**

**5D**  
 1ST **0 8 6 4 6**  
 2ND **2 7 3 5 4**  
 3RD **9 9 1 6 7**  
 4TH **8 6 4 6**  
 5TH **6 4 6**  
 6TH **4 6**

**6D**  
 1ST **4 5 9 3 3 0**  
 2ND **4 5 9 3 3** or **5 9 3 3 0**  
 3RD **4 5 9 3** or **9 3 3 0**  
 4TH **4 5 9** or **3 3 0**  
 5TH **4 5** or **3 0**

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**STAR 7**  
 3 11 16 24 33 40 + 42  
 Jackpot 1 **RM 2,343,151.00**  
 Jackpot 2 **RM 200,023.04**

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**WINNING NUMBERS**  
 PAYMENT GUARANTEED IN FULL  
**damacai**

Draw Date: 05/01/25 (Sun) Draw No: 595425 Venue: WISMA GENTING, KL

**1+3D SUPER1+3D**

1st Prize	4154
2nd Prize	1155
3rd Prize	1126

Starters  
 7467 7346  
 9046 9611  
 9267 3137  
 2027 3991  
 9810 6296

Consolation  
 4857 8437  
 4031 2488  
 1933 0341  
 6869 6973  
 3985 1448

**3+3D**

Jackpot 1 **RM4,152,218.60**

4154 + 1155	1155 + 4154
4154 + 1126	1126 + 4154
1155 + 1126	1126 + 1155

Jackpot 2 **RM279,566.50**  
 Winning pair matches any 1 of Top 3 & any 1 of 10 Starter Prizes.

**3+3D Bonus**

1st Prize	Bonus	1st Prize Bonus
544 154 +	OX	RM80,000.00
2nd Prize	Bonus	2nd Prize Bonus
651 155 +	DRAGON	RM1,075,904.60
3rd Prize	Bonus	3rd Prize Bonus
581 126 +	BOAR	RM1,571,506.00

Starters  
 197 467 217 346  
 799 046 809 611  
 929 267 553 137  
 002 027 313 991  
 219 810 256 296

Consolation  
 804 857 678 437  
 534 031 982 488  
 991 933 500 341  
 656 869 536 973  
 123 985 001 448

**3D**

1st Prize	154
2nd Prize	155
3rd Prize	126

Jackpot **RM641,020.80**

154 + 155 + 126	155 + 126 + 154
154 + 126 + 155	126 + 154 + 155
155 + 154 + 126	126 + 155 + 154

Winning combination matches the Top 3 Prizes in any order.

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RESULTS & STANDINGS

**ENGLISH PREMIER LEAGUE:** Aston Villa 2 (Barkley 58, Bailey 76) Leicester 1 (Mavididi 63), Brighton 1 (Joao Pedro 61-pen) Arsenal 1 (Nwaneri 18), Bournemouth 1 (Brooks 77) Everton 0, Crystal Palace 1 (Mateta 82) Chelsea 1 (Palmer 14), Manchester City 4 (Coufal 10-og, Haaland 42, 55, Foden 58) West Ham 1 (Füllkrug 71), Southampton 0 Brentford 5 (Schade 6, Mbeumo 62, 69-pen, Lewis-Potter 90+2, Wissa 90+4), Tottenham 1 (Solanke 4) Newcastle 2 (Gordon 6, Isak 38).

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Liverpool	18	14	3	1	45	17	45
Arsenal	20	11	7	2	39	18	40
Nottm Forest	19	11	4	4	26	19	37
Chelsea	20	10	6	4	39	24	36
Newcastle	20	10	5	5	34	22	35
Man City	20	10	4	6	36	27	34
Bournemouth	20	9	6	5	30	23	33
Aston Villa	20	9	5	6	30	32	32
Fulham	19	7	8	4	28	25	29
Brighton	20	6	10	4	30	29	28
Brentford	20	8	3	9	38	35	27
Tottenham	20	7	3	10	42	30	24
West Ham	20	6	5	9	24	39	23
Man Utd	19	6	4	9	21	26	22
Crystal Palace	20	4	9	7	21	28	21
Everton	19	3	8	8	15	25	17
Wolves	19	4	4	11	31	42	16
Ipswich	19	3	6	10	18	33	15
Leicester	20	3	5	12	23	44	14
Southampton	20	1	3	16	12	44	6

**CHAMPIONSHIP:** Blackburn 0 Burnley 1, Bristol City 1 Derby 0, Hull 3 Leeds 3, Middlesbrough 1 Cardiff 1, Norwich 2 Coventry 1, Preston 1 Oxford 1, Sheffield Wednesday 2 Millwall 2, Stoke 0 Plymouth 0, Swansea 1 West Brom 1, Watford 1 Sheffield United 2.

TOP 6	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Leeds	26	15	8	3	48	19	53
Burnley	26	14	10	2	31	9	52
Sheff Utd	26	16	6	4	36	17	52
Sunderland	25	13	8	4	38	22	47
Mid'boro	26	11	8	7	43	32	41
West Brom	26	9	13	4	32	21	40

**SERIE A:** Fiorentina 0 Napoli 3 (Neres 29, Lukaku 54-pen, McTominay 68), Venezia 1 (Pohjanpallo 5) Empoli 1 (Esposito 32), Verona 0 Udinese 0.

TOP 6	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Napoli	19	14	2	3	30	12	44
Atalanta	18	13	2	3	43	20	41
Inter Milan	17	12	4	1	45	15	40
Lazio	18	11	2	5	33	25	35
Juventus	18	7	11	0	30	15	32
Fiorentina	18	9	5	4	31	18	32

**FRENCH LIGUE 1:** Saint-Etienne 3 Reims 1, Lille 1 Nantes 1, Lyon 1 Montpellier 0.

TOP 6	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Paris SG	16	12	4	0	44	14	40
Marseille	15	9	3	3	32	18	30
Monaco	16	9	3	4	26	16	30
Lille	16	7	7	2	26	16	28
Lyon	16	8	4	4	28	21	28
Nice	16	7	6	3	31	21	27

# THT end TNB's reign, capture Charity Shield

**TERENGGANU HOCKEY TEAM (THT)** opened the 2025 Malaysia Hockey League (LHM) premier competition campaign in style when they clinched the Charity Shield (Piala Sumbangsih) after defeating defending champions Tenaga Nasional Berhad (TNB) 2-1 on Saturday.

South Korean national player Jang Jong Hyun puts TNB in front after converting a penalty flick in the 27th minute, but THT quickly equalised through a penalty corner by Faizal Saari in the 30th minute.

THT's winning goal came in the third quarter of

# Maleeq makes MBOR history

Six years old Malaysian dragster becomes top child pushbike champion

**D**ESPITE being only six years old, pushbike prodigy Maleeq Dragster has made history by entering the Malaysia Book of Records (MBOR) as the most successful child pushbike champion in international competitions within a year.

Maleeq, whose full name is Wan Ayden Maleeq Wan Muhd Muzri, achieved an extraordinary record with 14 titles, including winning the world champion title in the five-year-old category at the Run Bike Series (RCS) Championship in Tokyo.

His father, Datuk Seri Wan Muhd Muzri, described Maleeq's achievement as proof of the potential of pushbike sports in nurturing young athletes with resilience and courage.

"Maleeq has not only set a new record for Malaysia but also elevated the status of local pushbike sports to be on par with other children's sports globally."

"May he continue to maintain his excellent

performance and uphold Malaysia's name on the international stage," he said in a statement.

Even more impressive, Maleeq successfully defended his championship in Japan for two consecutive years and clinched victories in countries such as Thailand, Indonesia, the Philippines, Hong Kong and Singapore.

He also dominated local championships, including the M8 Malaysia International Pushbike GP Series 2 2024 Langkawi, M8 Malaysia International Pushbike GP Series 4 2024 Petronas and M8 Magnificent Race 2024.

Despite training rigorously only at night to avoid interfering with his school schedule, Maleeq defeated international competitors at the recent Rockfish Cup International Championship 2024.

According to Wan Muhd Muzri, who is also The M8 Cycling Club president, Maleeq is set to fly to Japan again this month to compete in the RCS Championship.

"Maleeq will represent Malaysia alongside his siblings and seven other riders - Fayyadh, Raziq, Izz Fast, Amni, Rafiq, Ilyas and Dayyan. This year's competition is expected to be intense, but we are confident that with thorough preparation, Malaysian riders can achieve the best results," he said.

Regarding Maleeq's future after pushbike sports, he said his son aims to pursue a career in Mini GP motorsport racing, supported by a collaboration between M8 Malaysia and ZK Racing.

"This programme provides talented children with the opportunity to advance further. Sports like these not only build self-confidence but also help children socialise with their peers," he added. - Bernama

## BAM names Allianz Malaysia as official financial services partner

**BADMINTON ASSOCIATION OF MALAYSIA (BAM)** yesterday announced Allianz Malaysia Berhad (Allianz Malaysia) as its official financial services partner.

Through the partnership, BAM senior and junior players, as well as coaches are set to receive comprehensive insurance protection when travelling abroad for competitions, while Allianz Malaysia will take on the title sponsor for the Malaysia Super 100 tournament.

BAM acting president Datuk V Subramaniam expressed his enthusiasm about the cooperation, and that they were honored to have Allianz Malaysia to elevate Malaysian badminton.

"Support from corporate leaders like Allianz

Malaysia is essential and will significantly contribute to the success of our programmes.

"This partnership will benefit BAM and provide added motivation and encouragement to the players," he said in a statement today.

Meanwhile, Allianz Malaysia chief executive officer Sean Wang said the company was committed to supporting sports globally through their sponsorship of major sports events, including the Olympics and Paralympics.

"We are excited at the prospect of working with BAM and supporting their various programmes and activities, and particularly delighted to be the title sponsor for the Allianz Malaysia Super 100 event later this year," he said. - Bernama



the match when Tengku Ahmad Tajuddin Tengku Abdul Jalil had no trouble converting a penalty corner in the 42nd minute, thus confirming the team's success.

The victory cured THT's disappointment of succumbing to the same opponent in the last edition which saw TNB thwart the squad from the East Coast to win the Charity Shield for the third time in a row.

THT head coach Mohd Harfizi Baharom said his men had successfully fulfilled their promise to achieve success without dragging the match into extra time and a penalty shootout.

"Today's players have really set their mind to win this game without penalty shootout, to win convincingly today."

"If we look at our outing, there were several shortcomings which would be touched up in the

training session, especially in terms of the combination of our players and imported players, so we have to get that combination as soon as possible," he said when met after the match here.

For the record, THT stopped the consecutive victories of TNB, who emerged as the treble champions in the last edition.

Mohd Harfizi said all these shortcomings, especially in terms of the combination between the players, will be improved further to face the league competition after this.

Earlier, the Women's Charity Shield clash saw the Blue Warriors clinch the championship after defeating defending champions Malaysian University 1-0 with national player Hanis Nadiah Onn emerging as the heroine when she scored the winning goal in the 16th minute. - Bernama

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#### 4D Classic

1st Prize	5532
2nd Prize	9514
3rd Prize	9541

SPECIAL	CONSOLATION
9744	1024
0388	1010
3308	8556
1524	3572
3788	4699
6669	8423
6868	3686
0762	7377
9323	2323
2330	3388

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#### 4D Jackpot

Jackpot 1 **RM8,495,102.04**

PARTIALLY WON

5532 + 9514	5532 + 9541
9514 + 5532	9514 + 9541
9541 + 5532	9541 + 9514

Jackpot 2 **RM393,726.85**

WON

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#### Jackpot Gold

Jackpot 1 **RM11,759,868.40** PARTIALLY WON

Jackpot 1 - Group 1 + Golden Number

Jackpot 2 **RM260,722.91** PARTIALLY WON

Jackpot 2 - Group 2 + Golden Number

GROUP 1	3 2 1 4 4 1
GROUP 2	3 2 1 4 4 OR 2 1 4 4 1
GROUP 3	3 2 1 4 OR 1 4 4 1
GROUP 4	3 2 1 OR 4 4 1
GROUP 5	3 2 OR 4 1
OR 1 4	
GOLDEN NUMBER	1 5

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SCAN ME

# Gutted Gunners

Arteta bemoans 'disappointing' penalty decision as Arsenal held by Brighton

**M**IKEL ARTETA said "I've never seen a decision like this in my career" after Arsenal's Premier League title challenge was dealt a blow by a debatable penalty award in a 1-1 draw at Brighton.

Seagulls striker Joao Pedro equalised from the spot in the second half at the Amex Stadium, having been felled by an unintentional headbutt from William Saliba.

The second-placed Gunners had been on course to cut the gap on leaders Liverpool to three points following an early opener from 17-year-old Ethan Nwaneri.

"(It's) a decision that is very, very disappointing," said Arsenal boss Arteta, who termed the ruling "bizarre" during an interview with BBC Radio 5Live.

"I've never seen a decision like this in my career. I asked the boys if they have, and nobody has seen it before.

"When you look at the incident, the distance, and the player Joao touching the ball, then Saliba touching the ball, you can see contact there."

Stand-in Brighton captain Pedro beat Saliba to the ball in the air after his first touch caused it to loop up inside Arsenal's 18-yard box.

The ball subsequently brushed the top of the Arsenal defender's head before he caught his opponent.

Arteta claimed VAR quickly backed the on-field decision of referee Anthony Taylor, allowing Pedro to send David Raya the wrong way from 12 yards in the 61st minute.

"I checked and, after three seconds, they said they already checked," Arteta said of VAR. "It seems quick.

"I asked Anthony (after the match) and he said we'll have a look at it."

Shortly after Brighton levelled the score, the Premier League explained the decision via the Premier League Match Centre account on X.

A statement read: "The referee's call of penalty for a foul by Saliba on Joao



Arsenal's Leandro Trossard (left) and Riccardo Calafiori (right) fight for the ball with Brighton's Joao Pedro during the English Premier League match yesterday. - AFP/IC

Pedro was checked and confirmed by VAR, who deemed there was sufficient contact for a penalty."

The result leaves Arsenal five points adrift of Arne Slot's table-topping Reds, having played two games more.

While Arteta was unhappy about a key decision in the match, he conceded his side's performance dropped off as the game wore on.

"It's a really tough place to come," said the Spaniard, who revealed goal

scorer Nwaneri was withdrawn at half-time due to a muscular issue.

"I think we started the game well, scored a great goal, didn't really concede anything.

"But in the second half we drop our

standards, our level with the ball, giving too many balls away.

"That never allowed us really to generate momentum and dominance in the game to control and go for the second goal."

Arsenal have won just three of their last six Premier League games, also stumbling to draws against Everton and Fulham.

The Gunners now face five consecutive home matches in four different competitions: Tottenham and Aston Villa in the Premier League, Newcastle United in the Carabao Cup, Manchester United in the FA Cup and Dinamo Zagreb in the Champions League.

Brighton deservedly registered a sixth draw of an eight-match winless run which stretches back to November following their improved second half showing.

Albion boss Fabian Hurler thought it was a blatant penalty and felt his team should have claimed all three points.

"It's a clear penalty," said the German. "If it happens with a different piece of the body, for example knee to knee, it (the challenge) is just too late.

"It's just the fact that it's too late, so I can't understand to say it's not a penalty."

Simon Adingra wasted Brighton's best chance of the first 45 minutes, before substitute Yankuba Minteh flashed across goal during the closing stages.

"We started not intense enough, we weren't in the game for the first 15, 20 minutes and then after the goal it changed, especially the second half," said Hurler, whose team sit 10th.

"We created chances, we were very intense, we were dominant.

"Therefore, when you see the game in general, we had the much bigger chances and in the end we are disappointed not to leave the pitch as the winner." - The Independent/Express Newspapers

**Ange furious after defeat**

Story on page 28

**Back on track**

Story on page 29

**Real interest sparks concern**

Story on page 30