



Call to clamp down on 'begpackers'

Such 'tourists' resort to soliciting money, conducting street performances or hawking when they run out of funds: KL immigration chief.

Report on page 5

# Boosting food security

Integrated farming, in which fish are reared on same land as *padi* fields, has potential to increase income of farmers while promoting growth of aquaculture, says academic.

Report on page 3

Only 1.6% of investment projects approved since 2021 still not implemented

More than 98% either completed, in progress or in planning stage, says Investment, Trade and Industry minister.

Report on page 2

IWK customers cry foul over outsourcing of arrears collection

Concerns raised on privacy issues over incessant unsolicited calls from debt recovery agents demanding payment for outstanding bills.

Report on page 4



SCUBA SANTA ... A diver dressed as Saint Nicholas greeting visitors at Aquaria KLCC yesterday in conjunction with the Christmas and New Year season. - BERNAMAPIC

>> See also page 4

## Newly named Sabah governor returns to Kota Kinabalu

**KOTA KINABALU:** Tun Musa Aman, who has been appointed the 11th Yang di-Pertua Negeri of Sabah effective Jan 1 next year, returned to Kota Kinabalu yesterday.

The aircraft carrying Musa arrived at Terminal 2 of the Kota Kinabalu International Airport at 12.02pm and was greeted by Sabah Science, Technology and Innovation Minister Datuk Mohd Arifin Mohd Arif.

Also present to welcome Musa were state Rural Development Minister Datuk Jahid Jahim, Parti Solidariti Tanah Airku deputy president Datuk Robert Tawik, who is also the state Assistant Works minister, state Community Development and People's Well-being Minister Datuk James Ratih, state Tourism, Culture and Environment Minister Datuk

Christina Liew as well as other state assemblymen.

Musa also mingled with the public who had gathered at Terminal 2 to welcome and congratulate him.

Earlier, Terminal 2 was filled with media personnel waiting to photograph Musa and get the latest information regarding the former Sabah chief minister.

On Tuesday, His Majesty the King of Malaysia Sultan Ibrahim presented Musa with the instrument of appointment during a ceremony at Balaiung Kecil, Istana Negara in Kuala Lumpur.

Musa, 73, was appointed the Yang di-Pertua Negeri of Sabah according to Article 1 of the Sabah Constitution for four years from Jan 1 until Dec 31, 2028. — Bernama



Musa being greeted by a resident who was among those gathered to meet him at the airport. — BERNAMAPIC

## 'No delay in investment projects once approved'

➤ Only 1.6% have not been implemented, while 98.4% are completed, in progress or at planning stage: Minister

**KUALA LUMPUR:** Only 1.6% of approved investment projects from 2021 to March this year have not been implemented, said Investment, Trade and Industry Minister Datuk Seri Tengku Zafrul Abdul Aziz.

In a post on Instagram and X, he said on Tuesday that 98.4% of the investment projects have either been completed, in progress or in the planning stage.

"What does this statistic mean? It means that once an investment is approved, it's as good as done and just waiting to be implemented. Rarely is an approved investment not carried out.

"Approved investments mean the companies' applications to invest in Malaysia have been approved by the Malaysian Investment Development Authority (Mida)," he said.

He emphasised that memoranda of understanding (MoU) are not considered approved investments.

"Applications from companies to carry out business activities are approved under the

Industrial Co-ordination Act 1975. If a company has a shareholder capital of at least RM2.5 million or employs at least 75 full-time workers, it must first apply for a manufacturing licence," he said.

Tengku Zafrul added that companies need to submit corporate details to Mida on the industry it is involved in, project location, products made, its implementation period, annual costs and shareholder details.

"Additionally, applications to invest in Malaysia also require information on the number of jobs to be created, and the percentage of workers in management, technical and skilled worker categories.

"We want to create high-paying jobs for the people. If the majority of workers are unskilled, how will Malaysia progress in the long term?"

Tengku Zafrul emphasised the importance for companies intending to invest in Malaysia to declare their sources of raw materials and components used in the production of their main products or projects, Bernama reported.

"We are a country that encourages the use of locally produced components. Why? Because when new factories use local components, existing local companies can raise output.

"Additionally, new companies can be established to meet the needs of these factories. Only in this way can our country's ecosystem be developed. We also want to know the markets for their products, if they are to be exported or for domestic use. If they are meant for export, the country's national income will rise. Companies must also provide their projected revenue."

He said another crucial aspect is research and development (R&D). Companies investing in Malaysia must have an R&D component to develop local technology.

"Therefore, the process of approving investments is not as easy as it seems. It must meet all the stipulated aspects before a manufacturing licence is granted. If it is just an MoU submission, the application will not be approved.

"That's why when certain parties undermine the approved investment data, they do not understand how complicated the process is. Many conditions must be met, and this shows the seriousness of those who truly want to invest in our country," he said.

## Vegetable prices expected to stabilise

**TUMPAT:** Vegetable prices are expected to stabilise by March next year after the northeast monsoon season ends.

Agriculture and Food Security Minister Datuk Seri Mohamad Sabu said unpredictable weather has reduced the supply of vegetables, leading to price hikes.

"Every monsoon season, this issue arises, and we have received reports indicating a rise in vegetable prices.

"We anticipate that the issue will be resolved by March next year, with the Federal Agricultural Marketing Authority playing a key role in ensuring adequate vegetable supply in the affected states," he said at the Bunga Raya Area Farmers Organisation yesterday.

Earlier, Mohamad distributed Phase 2 of a special cash assistance initiative, amounting to RM6.3 million, to 10,628 padi farmers in Kelantan who were affected by floods.

Mohamad said initial losses in the Kelantan agricultural sector due to floods since last month are estimated at RM33.2 million, affecting 4,888 individuals.

"A total of 10,229.12ha of agricultural land were impacted, including 9,958.29ha of padi fields involving 4,207 farmers, while the remainder comprised fisheries and other crops.

"The Agriculture and Food Security Ministry, along with its departments and agencies, remains committed to assisting all affected groups, in line with the core value of compassion under Malaysia Madani," he said. — Bernama

## Plan S. Korea holidays carefully, M'sians told

**KUALA LUMPUR:** The Malaysian embassy in Seoul has reminded Malaysians to be careful when choosing a travel agency to avoid problems while on holiday in South Korea.

In an Instagram post yesterday, the embassy advised the public to check the background of travel agencies before making a booking.

Tourists are also urged to check the list of registered travel agencies via the Tourism, Arts and Culture Ministry official website at <https://www.motac.gov.my/semakan/tobtab> to help them make informed choices.

The embassy stressed the importance of ensuring all dealings with travel agencies are supported by payment receipts and related documents.

Recently, netizens have reported negative experiences with travel agencies run by social media personalities in South Korea.

They claimed that the services received did not meet expectations, including delays in providing flight tickets and last-minute accommodation changes. — Bernama

## No directive on body mass index

**PUTRAJAYA:** The Public Service Department (PSD) has clarified that it has never issued a directive mandating all civil servants to maintain a balanced body mass index (BMI).

The clarification came in response to a statement by Miri Hospital director Dr Jack Wong Siew Yui on Dec 7, titled *JPA Wajibkan Semua Penjawat Awam Miliki BMI Sihat Mulai Tahun Depan*.

In a statement yesterday, PSD emphasised that while it encourages all civil servants to conduct self-health screenings, including measuring their weight and height to determine their BMI status, it was not a requirement.

"The information can be declared in the Human Resources Management Information System as part of promoting health awareness." — Bernama

## Govt monitoring infrastructure adequacy in rural areas

**KUALA LUMPUR:** The government is monitoring the adequacy of basic infrastructure and social facilities in rural areas through the Rural and Regional Development Ministry internal monitoring system and MyProject, which is managed by the Implementation Coordination Unit of the Prime Minister's Department.

Rural and Regional Development Deputy Minister Datuk Rubiah Wang said the data serves as a primary reference for evaluating the effectiveness of programmes and projects implemented in rural areas.

"The ministry also leverages data from the Statistics Department, such as the basic facilities survey report, My Local Stats and the Spatial Characteristics of Rural Malaysia System," she said during a question-and-answer session in the

Dewan Negara yesterday.

She was responding to a question from Senator Datuk Koh Nai Kwong, who inquired about trends in population migration from rural to urban areas, and the evaluation of basic infrastructure and social facilities in rural communities.

Meanwhile, Rubiah said the Rural Development Policy 2030 provides a comprehensive framework for rural development, focusing on infrastructure improvements, economic growth, education, health and community empowerment.

"Next year, we will begin workshops in January. Although the budget has been approved, specific priorities need to be identified to ensure that every project implemented delivers maximum impact." — Bernama

## State govt hopeful about high-speed rail project

**SEREMBAN:** The Negeri Sembilan government remains optimistic about the implementation of the high-speed rail (HSR) project connecting Kuala Lumpur and Singapore, despite no official decision being made yet.

Menteri Besar Datuk Seri Aminuddin Harun emphasised the importance of maintaining the proposed alignment to support rapid and modern development, particularly the Malaysia Vision Valley (MVV) 2.0 project.

"The HSR is vital for Negeri Sembilan. While there has been no official announcement on its continuation, discussions indicate that we are committed to preserving the original HSR alignment to protect its potential benefits.

"The state government is confident that the project can move forward, although the timeline remains uncertain," he told reporters after officiating at the groundbreaking ceremony for MVV City yesterday.

He said the HSR project could serve as a catalyst for socioeconomic transformation by connecting regional and global markets, fostering dynamic economic clusters, and unlocking new trade and investment opportunities.

Previously, transport think tank My Mobility Vision chief strategy officer Rahman Hussin said reviving the HSR project would provide Malaysia with a transformative opportunity to maximise its economic potential and reinforce its leadership in Southeast Asia. – Bernama

## No conditions on driving licence renewal for elderly

**PUTRAJAYA:** The Road Transport Department (RTD) has denied claims that additional conditions have been imposed on senior citizens for the renewal of their driving licence.

Its director-general Datuk Aedy Fadly Ramli clarified that neither the Transport Ministry nor the department has introduced any new requirements for senior citizens to renew their licence.

The renewal process for senior citizens continues to follow the existing conditions and SOPs under the Road Transport Act 1987.

"The public is urged to verify the accuracy of any information received."

This follows the circulation of a message on social media, which falsely stated that senior citizens must undergo competency and health assessments before renewing their licence.

For more details on the renewal process, the public can visit [www.jpj.gov.my](http://www.jpj.gov.my). – Bernama

## Malaysia to focus on deepening foreign collaboration and trade

**KUALA LUMPUR:** Malaysia will double down on its strategy of deepening trade and collaboration with other countries in 2025, guided by three fundamental tenets of how the nation deals with the world, said Economy Minister Rafizi Ramli.

The fundamental tenets are

breakout development priority, good neighbour principle and beyond-trade thinking.

"The old foreign direct investment model in Southeast Asia must change from one focused on tax incentives and low-cost hiring to one about technology transfer

and indigenous innovation to create breakthroughs.

"Most advanced Southeast Asian countries are stuck in the middle-income trap of being too expensive to compete in low-cost manufacturing but not innovative enough to compete in technology.

"We are pressed from the bottom (cost) and the top (technology)," he said during session five of the Leadership Conference, Malaysia-China Summit at the Malaysia International Trade and Exhibition Centre yesterday. – Bernama

# Integrated farming could boost food security: Expert

BY HARITH KAMAL  
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► 'Method considered nature-based solution in aquaculture, focusing on protecting, restoring and managing aquatic ecosystems'

**PETALING JAYA:** Food security has been a hot topic in the country for some time, with Deputy Agriculture and Food Security Minister Datuk Arthur Joseph Kurup saying Malaysia aims to achieve 40% aquaculture production by 2030 to meet its fisheries needs.

Aquaculture accounts for just 30% of the nation's total fisheries production, with Malaysians consuming 45kg of fish and fishery products per capita last year.

"The fisheries sector is crucial for Malaysia's food security, socioeconomic development, and cultural and environmental protection," he said.

Universiti Malaysia Terengganu Institute of Climate Adaptation and

Marine Biotechnology director Prof Dr Yeong Yik Sung said integrated farming, in which fish are farmed in the same land area as rice, could boost Malaysia's food security.

"Such a method is considered a nature-based solution in aquaculture, focusing on protecting, restoring and sustainably managing aquatic ecosystems.

"It not only increases income for rice farmers but also promotes the growth of aquaculture in Malaysia."

Yeong said the method promotes efficient use of freshwater and aids in pest control since rice

plants and fish share the same water source.

"Some fish species help control pests in rice fields by eating insects and weeds, reducing the need for pesticides and herbicides."

Universiti Putra Malaysia fisheries biology lecturer Prof Dr Aziz Arshad said Malaysia has potential in adopting integrated farming as the country has a large rice-growing area in Peninsular Malaysia, although several issues need to be addressed.

"The use of artificial fertilisers and pesticides must be stopped,

and rice plots need to be modified to include fish subzones and proper planting distances.

Aziz said relevant agencies should be roped in to kick off pilot projects to demonstrate the system's potential, adding that such projects could encourage the government to invest in developing an eco-friendly farming approach.

"The integrated system boosts economic stability by providing additional income from fish sales. It also benefits the environment by improving soil fertility, strengthening soil ecosystems and minimising pest problems."

Putra Business School lecturer and agricultural economics expert Prof Datuk Dr Mad Nasir Shamsudin said an integrated farming method could strengthen rural food security and reduce poverty.

"China, Vietnam and Bangladesh have implemented integrated rice-fish farming to boost rural food security and reduce poverty. In Africa, some countries have increased food availability and farm income.

"Farmers in Malaysia may face a high initial cost due to the need to modify rice fields to include trenches and dykes.

"They will also have to buy fish fry or fingerlings, feed, and other supplies, which could be difficult for small-scale farmers with limited funds."

Mad Nasir said the government and private sector should support integrated farming to improve the economy, including through incentives, technical assistance and awareness campaigns.

"Collaborative research and farming methods, such as integrated pest management, could help farmers adapt and succeed. With the right support, integrated farming could become a sustainable and profitable solution for the country."



Aziz said relevant agencies should be roped in to kick off pilot projects to show the potential of the system, adding that such projects could encourage the government to invest in developing an eco-friendly approach. – BERNAMAPIC

## Rotation system to address healthcare workforce shortage

**KUALA LUMPUR:** The Health Ministry will introduce a rotation system to improve the placement of medical officers to address staff shortage in the sector.

Its deputy minister Datuk Lukanisman Awang Sauni said the ministry is studying the system's implementation to prevent excessive stress among its staff, which could affect their mental health.

"If a doctor is stationed in Miri and assigned to Long Semado or Long Bemang in Baram, we will not keep

them in that location for an extended period. Instead, we will apply a rotation system," he said during a question-and-answer session in Dewan Negara yesterday.

He was responding to a supplementary question from Senator Datuk Dr Mohd Hatta Md Ramli regarding the shortage of doctors in rural areas and certain states.

Lukanisman pointed out that many doctors are content to serve in specific areas as the experience gained, especially in Sabah and

Sarawak, provides them with an advantage when returning to Peninsular Malaysia.

He said the ministry has created 16,347 new positions across various roles this year, including 1,500 additional medical officer posts.

Responding to a supplementary question from Senator Dr R.A. Lingeswaran on whether the government plans to form a committee to address staff resignations, he said the ministry is considering the matter as several

factors influence the resignation of medical officers and other healthcare personnel.

"We are working to ensure continuous staffing. Sometimes, resignations are driven by the personal choices of medical officers."

He cited examples of contract officers who were offered permanent positions in Sabah and Sarawak but declined the offers and opted to remain in Peninsular Malaysia, Bernama reported.

He stressed that the shortage of

doctors would persist if the issue is not addressed.

As of Sept 30, the ministry's staffing data showed that 299,672 healthcare personnel are serving in the ministry, including 266,898 permanent staff and 32,774 on contract.

Of the total, 7,720 are medical specialists, 44,030 are medical officers, 7,626 are dental officers, 12,775 are pharmacists, 70,075 are nurses, 9,798 are assistant medical officers and the balance comprises personnel from other service schemes.



# IWK faces backlash over outsourcing of debt collection

➤ Customers raise privacy concerns over unsolicited calls from appointed agents

BY QIRANA NABILLA  
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**PETALING JAYA:** Indah Water Konsortium (IWK) is facing criticism for outsourcing the collection of arrears to debt collectors, with many customers raising privacy concerns after receiving frequent calls demanding payment for outstanding bills.

Additionally, the "TrueCaller" app has flagged numbers used by IWK debt collectors as spam due to customer complaints and unwise over unsolicited calls regarding sensitive matters such as arrears.

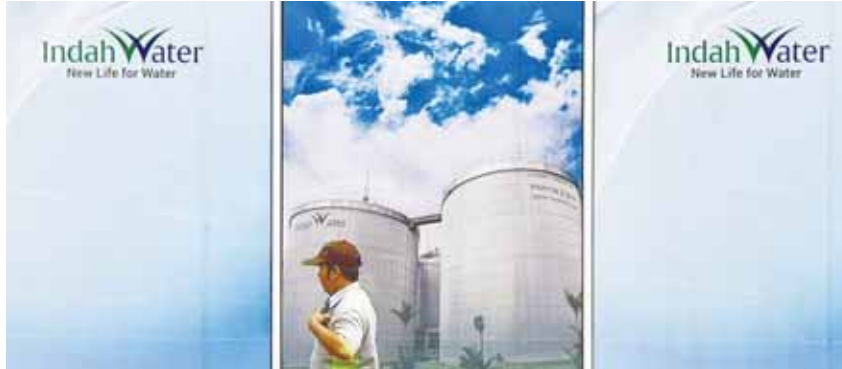
A customer, who identified himself as Ahmad, shared his frustration over receiving multiple calls demanding payment.

"I was shocked that IWK is using debt collectors to harass us. As a major company, IWK should at least inform the public that it has outsourced its bill collection. With so many online scams, it's unsettling to get calls from unknown numbers.

"The caller even read out my address and account details. It's clear that IWK's public relations team is not doing their job effectively," he said.

IWK CEO Narendran Maniam confirmed that the company has outsourced arrears collection to debt collectors.

"We understand the public's concerns about unsolicited phone



Narendran encouraged customers to verify the authenticity of IWK calls by contacting its official customer service channels, such as its careline, social media platforms or email. — ADAM AMIR HAMZAH/THESUN

calls, particularly given the rising prevalence of scams. Some customers have already contacted us for clarification," he said.

Addressing complaints about privacy breaches, Narendran explained that outsourcing debt collection is a standard industry practice, widely used by utility companies, banks and telecommunications providers.

He said the method enables more systematic and effective arrears recovery compared with traditional paper notices.

"When engaging third-party debt collectors, we ensure compliance through legally enforceable data-sharing agreements, which mandate strict protocols for secure handling, usage and confidentiality of customer information."

Narendran encouraged customers to verify the authenticity of any calls by contacting IWK's official customer service channels, such as its careline,

social media platforms or email.

"We assure our customers of compliance with the Personal Data Protection Act. IWK places a high priority on protecting customer data and strictly adheres to the Act's requirements," he said.

He added that IWK has undertaken various measures to encourage timely bill payments, including promotions, giveaways, legal action, debt collection efforts, red notices and collaboration with Credit Tip-Off Service.

"These efforts are necessary because, unlike other utility providers such as Tenaga Nasional Berhad or water operators, IWK cannot immediately disconnect services for non-payment, as doing so would have significant public health and environmental implications.

"IWK also does not impose late payment charges, which limits enforcement measures," Narendran said.

He clarified that customers are notified of outstanding balances through their bills.

If payment is not received, a red bill is issued as a formal overdue notice, which also includes information about the involvement of a debt collection agency.

"Debt collectors only contact customers after these notifications have been sent, ensuring they are aware of their arrears," he explained.

IWK also communicates important updates through announcements, public notices and various channels such as the company's website, social media platforms and its customer portal.

Key updates are also included directly on sewerage bills to enhance visibility.

"Regarding the involvement of debt collectors, IWK ensures their engagement aligns with regulatory and customer service standards," Narendran added.

## Penang Zakat receives RM1m in business tithe

**GEORGE TOWN:** The Penang Development Corporation (PDC) delivered on its commitment to corporate social responsibility (CSR) yesterday by contributing RM1 million in business tithe to Penang Zakat.

PDC CEO Datuk Aziz Bakar presented the tithe to Penang Zakat CEO Amran Hazali during a ceremony witnessed by Penang Islamic Religious Council president Datuk Dr Mohamad Abdul Hamid, who is also Penang deputy chief minister I.

Aziz said PDC remains steadfast in its dedication to social responsibility, particularly in supporting those in need.

"Thanks to PDC's outstanding financial performance in 2024 and a cash flow budget surplus, we are pleased to share our success with the tithe recipients and other less fortunate groups in Penang, especially in areas under PDC's development, through this RM1 million business tithe contribution," he said at the handover ceremony. — Bernama

## Sepang to launch zero-straw initiative

**SEPANG:** The Sepang Municipal Council will introduce a zero-use plastic straw initiative and enhance the plastic-free programme for single-use plastics at all Ramadan bazaars under its jurisdiction next year.

Its deputy president Muhamad Shah Osman encouraged visitors to the bazaars to bring their own food containers in support of the 2025 Plastic-Free Campaign.

"The implementation of this programme will indirectly raise awareness and provide exposure to the local community on the importance of caring for the environment by supporting such campaigns," he said during the full meeting of the Sepang Municipal Council yesterday.

He added that Ramadan bazaars will be located at Kip Mall, Cyberjaya, Taman Mas, Desa Pinggiran Putera, Kosmopleks, Taman Putra Perdana, Sungai Merab, Dengkil Jaya, Dengkil, Sungai Pelek, Sepang International Circuit and Sepang Putra. — Bernama

## Scuba Santa delights visitors at Aquaria KLCC

**KUALA LUMPUR:** Swimming with sharks and stingrays while dressed as Father Christmas might sound unusual, but this is precisely what divers at Aquaria KLCC are doing to spread joy to visitors, especially children, this festive season.

Among those taking on the role of Underwater Santa is professional diver Mohd Salwa Mustafa.

With over 17 years' diving experience, Mohd Salwa said wearing a Santa Claus costume made of velvet and faux fur underwater is no small feat, as the material becomes significantly heavier, making movement more challenging.

"I wear the costume over my diving suit, so it's essentially two layers.

"During feeding sessions, I usually stay in one spot and avoid moving too far. This is essential to ensure my safety and comfort," he said, adding that he swims to the bottom of the aquarium, which is four metres deep, to feed over 5,000 aquatic animals in the expansive facility.

For Mohd Salwa, the delight and excitement of children seeing him

dressed as Santa are his primary motivation to deliver his best "performance".

"Many children have never seen Santa Claus underwater.

"I use simple gestures to interact with them, like waving or making heart shapes with my hands. It makes them feel so thrilled and happy." — Bernama

## Govt urged to address soaring medical insurance premiums

**KUALA LUMPUR:** Amid widespread public concern over insurers and *takaful* operators significantly increasing medical premiums, the government must intervene to ensure rates remain fair and affordable, said Universiti Malaya Islamic Studies Academy Shariah and Management Department senior lecturer Dr Azian Madun.

He emphasised the necessity of government action to prevent unjustifiable premium hikes being

passed on to consumers.

"The government, which upholds ethical practices and greater transparency, must take action to address this issue. Otherwise, insurance will become a luxury only the wealthy can afford," he said.

In recent weeks, the insurance and *takaful* industry has faced heavy criticism after announcing steep premium increases, reportedly between 40% and 70%, citing rising medical costs.

However, MPs highlighted during a recent session in the Dewan Rakyat that both insurers and private hospitals have reported strong profits and consistent revenue growth.

They expressed concerns that these entities were transferring high costs to consumers and policyholders, many of whom are already struggling with rising food prices, diesel rationalisation and other escalating living expenses.

The issue has drawn the attention

of the Prime Minister and Finance Minister Datuk Seri Anwar Ibrahim, who has instructed Bank Negara Malaysia (BNM) and the Health Ministry to establish a control mechanism to ensure premium increases are reasonable.

MPs also relayed complaints from policyholders, some of whom have already begun paying the higher premiums, which they consider excessive but feel compelled to pay to maintain adequate coverage.

Others, unable to afford the increased rates, risk losing their insurance altogether.

MPs also cited cases such as that of a policyholder whose new premiums are set to exceed her insurance coverage, leaving her in a precarious financial situation.

BNM is expected to announce interim measures to address the rising insurance premiums soon, offering much-needed clarity and relief to affected policyholders. — Bernama

# Authorities urged to clamp down on 'begpackers'

➤ Foreign nationals resort to begging, conducting street performances or hawking after running out of funds: Immigration director

■ BY KIRTINEE RAMESH  
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**PETALING JAYA:** Foreign backpackers begging locals for money has become a growing concern in Malaysian cities, raising frustration among the public and authorities.

A backpacker was recently spotted at the southbound Ulu Bernam rest and service area in Selangor with a cardboard sign asking for funds to return home after nine years of travelling. The incident sparked outrage online, with netizens criticising his behaviour and calling on authorities to clamp down on such tourists.

Kuala Lumpur Immigration Department director Wan Mohammed Saupee Wan Yusoff said the city, which is a popular tourist destination due to its affordability and attractions, has increasingly faced issues with allegedly stranded backpackers, or "begpackers".

"These people resort to begging, conducting street performances or hawking when they run out of funds. Hotspots for such activities are Bukit Bintang, Brickfields, Jalan Tuanku Abdul Rahman, Chow Kit and the Central Market."

He added that foreign nationals found begging would face legal consequences under the Immigration Act 1959/63.

"If they are found contravening their visa or pass conditions, they may be fined, prosecuted and deported. Begpackers are categorised as prohibited immigrants under Section 8 of the Act."

He stressed that the issue goes beyond contravening visa conditions as many begpackers are motivated by financial gain.

"The department conducts enforcement activities throughout Kuala Lumpur based on public complaints, proactive measures and intelligence gathering as we do not take the matter lightly."

He said when detainees lack valid travel documents or financial means to return home, the department contacts the respective foreign embassies to verify their nationalities, and the embassies then coordinate with their families to facilitate the purchase of return tickets.

Measures to prevent such matters include stringent visa processing requirements to ensure travellers can support themselves financially during their stay.

For instance, travellers must present supporting documents to immigration officers at airports, including return flight tickets, hotel bookings, travel itineraries and proof of sufficient funds, before

being granted entry.

The department also posts notices, warnings and updates on its website, and publicises enforcement actions to emphasise that violating Malaysian laws is a serious offence.

"Begpackers pose social and economic problems, aside from becoming a burden to our public healthcare facilities and public health as a whole. They cause public unease and inconvenience."

Universiti Teknologi Mara Selangor tourism economics lecturer Prof Dr Mohd Hafiz Hanafiah said the rise of begpackers in Malaysia reflects a lack of respect for local culture and socioeconomic realities.

"Malaysia is known for its hospitality but such behaviour smacks of exploitation and undermines the true spirit of cultural exchange and adventure that backpacking is meant to represent."

He said begpackers harm

Malaysia's reputation by portraying the country as a destination that tolerates such exploitation, risking having the positive experiences of responsible travellers overshadowed.

"Begpackers often divert charity and street income away from those who genuinely need it, such as struggling street artists. This could desensitise communities, reducing support for people in genuine need."

He urged authorities to enforce stricter tourist visa regulations and monitor public spaces to stamp out the begpacking menace, noting that Thailand and Indonesia have implemented stricter visa checks and awareness campaigns while Singapore has strict anti-begging laws.

"Malaysia should adopt similar measures to safeguard its reputation as a country that appreciates and welcomes all tourists, including backpackers, provided they conduct themselves responsibly."



Mohd Hafiz said 'begpackers' harm Malaysia's reputation by portraying the country as a destination that tolerates such exploitation, and overshadowing the positive experiences of responsible travellers. — ADIB RAWI YAHYA/THESUN

## Woman held in bribery case

**MALACCA:** A 46-year-old private company owner in Selangor has been remanded for six days by the Malaysian Anti-Corruption Commission (MACC) to facilitate a corruption investigation linked to obtaining a "Datuk Seri" title from a state two years ago.

A source revealed that the suspect was detained at 4.45pm on Tuesday after she presented herself at the MACC office in Malacca to provide a statement.

"She is being investigated for soliciting and accepting bribes amounting to over RM375,000 from an individual to secure the 'Datuk Seri' title through a syndicate."

The case is being probed under Section 16(a)(A) of the MACC Act 2009, which provides a minimum fine of five times the bribe amount or RM10,000, whichever is higher, and up to 20 years' jail upon conviction.

The remand application was made by MACC before Magistrate Sharda Shienha Mohd Suleiman at the Ayer Keroh Magistrate's Court yesterday, Bernama reported.

Malacca MACC director Adi Supian Shafie confirmed the suspect's detention and remand.

## Man scammed of RM2 million

**JOHOR BAHRU:** A 70-year-old clothing store owner has claimed to have suffered losses of over RM2 million after falling victim to an online investment scam.

Johor police chief Datuk M. Kumar said the man was added to a WhatsApp group promoting a foreign currency investment scheme that promised high returns.

He said the victim contacted the group's administrator to learn more about the investment.

"He made multiple transactions amounting to RM2.11 million to several bank accounts between November and early this month."

"He also followed directions to download an app and register an account to monitor his investments."

Kumar said the victim found his account reflecting profits of over RM6.2 million but could not sell the shares or withdraw the alleged earnings.

Believing he had been scammed, the man filed a police report in Batu Pahat yesterday, Bernama reported.

The case is being probed under Section 420 of the Penal Code.

## Victims aged above 50 hardest hit by fraud

**KUALA LUMPUR:** Police have revealed that losses suffered by online fraud victims aged 50 and above were the highest compared with other age groups.

Bukit Aman Commercial Crime Investigation Department director Datuk Seri Ramli Mohamed Yusoff said from 2022 until last year, 59,974 individuals fell victim to online fraud and scams, and 11,157 (18.6%) were aged 50 and above.

He said a similar trend was recorded this year as 8,022 (24%) of the 33,549 cases recorded as of Dec 15 involved victims in the same age group.

"Losses from online fraud cases

recorded in 2022 and 2023 were about RM2 billion.

"Although the number of victims in this age group is low compared with other age groups, the losses for this age group in 2022 and 2023 were over RM900 million, or 44%, of the total losses."

Ramli said the losses involving victims aged 50 and above recorded this year have reached RM780 million (54%) of total losses amounting to RM1.45 billion.

"This explains why the older group is a 'quality target' for fraud syndicates. They should always be wary of online fraud tactics."

"Police are calling for information

on commercial crimes, especially the *modus operandi* of online fraud syndicates, to be shared with all groups, especially parents, family members, acquaintances and neighbours, and to make scams a topic of discussion to avoid becoming victims."

He said police recorded 6,909 cases of e-commerce fraud involving losses of RM62 million between January and Dec 15.

He also said fraud stemming from advertisements via Facebook recorded the highest number of cases at 3,457, followed by WhatsApp at 1,168, TikTok at 800 and Telegram at 771. — Bernama

## Two mining companies ordered shut

**PUTRAJAYA:** The Natural Resources and Environmental Sustainability Ministry has issued a stop-work order to two mining companies in Kelantan suspected of causing pollution in Sungai Kelaik, Gua Musang.

Minister Nik Nazmi Nik Ahmad said the decision followed investigations by the Environment Department into the compliance of both companies with the Environmental Quality Act 1974 (Act 127).

"Investigations revealed that Aqua Orion Sdn Bhd had carried out activities without obtaining the necessary approval under Subsection 34A(3). Investigation papers will be opened under Subsection 34A(6)."

He said investigations also found the premises of the other firm, Syarikat Perlombongan Gua Musang Sdn Bhd, was not operational and no iron ore mining or processing was being carried out.

He said action would be taken under Act 127 if the projects fail to comply with the conditions outlined in the Environmental Impact Assessment (EIA) report.

Nik Nazmi said the department would send a letter to the Kelantan Land and Mines Office to delay the renewal of Aqua Orion Sdn Bhd's mining licence until the EIA report is submitted for assessment and approval. — Bernama



# Malaysian adventurer makes it to Antarctica

➤ Solo biker considers icy dip in  $-2^{\circ}\text{C}$  waters as one of most unforgettable experiences on expedition

**KUALA LUMPUR:** Malaysian biker Katiravan Subarayan, 63, who is on an extraordinary trip around the world, has traversed picturesque Latin America and arrived further south in Antarctica.

On Nov 12, he became one of the handful of Malaysians to set foot on the icy continent.

Katiravan is on an expedition to raise awareness about climate change, promote nature conservation and highlight Malaysia as a premier tourism destination.

The retired electrician recently made his way to the southern part of the globe, travelling through Latin America on his BMW R 1200cc GSA motorcycle, affectionately named Parameswara.

While travelling through Argentina, which was the 51st country he has visited, Katiravan connected with trip organisers who facilitated his travel to Antarctica. He joined a group and boarded a ship that departed from Ushuaia in Argentina for Antarctica, where he spent 11 nights.

"During our voyage to Antarctica, we were thoroughly briefed about the dos and don'ts. We couldn't touch any of the fauna or the ice to protect them and the environment and to ensure everyone's safety," he said.

"I paid about US\$5,600 (RM25,000). I don't have any sponsors for my journey but fortunately, I have some money from selling my small shoplot in Kepong, which is helping to fund my travels."

As the ship arrived in the Gerlache Strait, Katiravan said the crew made sure the bags and clothes of all passengers were vacuum-sealed to prevent contamination.

"The boots provided by the organiser had to be washed with a special chemical before we stepped onto the ice," he said.



Katiravan and other visitors in the group upon arrival at Antarctica. — PIC FROM KATIRAVAN SUBARAYAN FACEBOOK PAGE

The most unforgettable experience for him was voluntarily taking a plunge into the freezing, ice-cold water at Girard Bay, where the temperature was  $-2^{\circ}\text{C}$ .

During their voyage, word reached to the organisers about Katiravan's journey around the world and the sacrifices he had made to fund his travels, Bernama reported.

"As the crew was giving a briefing, they called me up to speak in front of an audience of 50 people, to share my travel stories and explain why I was doing this."

Katiravan admitted he was nervous about speaking but despite his anxiety, he delivered a presentation that delighted the audience.

"I told them I have been travelling around the world since early January 2023 and haven't been

home since.

"I said I was doing this to raise awareness about climate change, to campaign for people around the world to start saving our environment, and to promote Malaysia's tourism attractions to the world," he said.

He added that in every country he has visited, he has planted multiple trees and encouraged residents to plant a tree for every occasion in their lives.

"I was touched that they stood up and applauded, and some even gave me a hug, thanking me for what I was doing."

He also shared that during his travels around the globe, which have spanned over 700 days, he has successfully planted 113 trees across 51 countries.

## Perak celebrates *Kuih Pau* legacy

**TANJONG MALIM:** *Kuih Pau*, a traditional steamed bun delicacy with black bean, coconut or *kaya* filling is loved for its fluffy texture. While some may see *Kuih Pau* as an ordinary snack, it holds special significance for residents of Tanjong Malim in Perak.

This humble treat has been elevated to a tourism product of the district and has been featured in the Perak tourism calendar for the past seven years.

According to Tanjong Malim district council president Mohd Ikram Ahmad, the Pau X Muallim Recreation Festival 2024 was recently organised to celebrate and showcase the distinctive heritage and uniqueness of *Kuih Pau*, which has been synonymous with the district since 1926.

"The identity of Tanjong Malim is closely tied to *Kuih Pau*."

"With 2026 marking the 100th anniversary of *Kuih Pau* in the Muallim district, its legacy continues to thrive."

Mohd Ikram said the festival, which was organised in collaboration with Tourism Perak, is the third edition held since 2017, adding that it would be held on a larger scale in coming years.

One of the attractions at the festival was "Pau Legend" entrepreneur Surdi Maris, 72, who has been selling *Kuih Pau* in Tanjong Malim since 1986.

Surdi said he uses the traditional method of preparing *Kuih Pau* by mixing the flour for the dough with his hands.

"I'm used to kneading the dough by hand and I also make the filling myself."

"I can sell more than 100 *Kuih Pau* daily and on weekends, it is more because of the presence of many visitors," he said.

Surdi sells *Kuih Pau* on his motorcycle on Jalan Besar, offering five types of fillings – chicken curry, meat curry, black beans, *kaya* and coconut.

Behrang assemblywoman Salina Samsudin, who officiated at the festival in Persisiran Sungai Bernam, said the difference highlighted in this year's festival is the concept of "healing", or relaxing along the banks of Sungai Bernam.

"Visitors at the event could enjoy *Kuih Pau* and coffee in a relaxing natural atmosphere," she said. — Bernama

## EDUCATION

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# Death row Filipina returns home to 'new life'

➤ Marcos has final say over pardon or remission

**MANILA:** A Filipina who spent nearly 15 years on Indonesia's death row tearfully reunited with family members yesterday after arriving here, where she now awaits a hoped-for pardon in a women's prison.

Mother of two Mary Jane Veloso landed at daybreak, then was immediately transferred to prison following a repatriation deal between the two countries over a decade in the making.

Technically still serving a life sentence, how long she remains behind bars is now in the hands of President Ferdinand Marcos.

The 39-year-old was arrested and sentenced to death in 2010 after the suitcase she was carrying was found to be lined with 2.6kg of heroin.

Veloso wept as she hugged one of her sons and her parents yesterday inside the Correctional Institution for Women in Manila, where she is being detained under the terms of a transfer agreement with Indonesia that removed the possibility of execution.

She flew home without handcuffs alongside Filipino correctional officials on an overnight commercial flight after a Jakarta ceremony marking "the end of a harrowing chapter in Veloso's life", the corrections bureau said in a statement.

"I hope our president (Ferdinand Marcos) will give me clemency so I can go back to my family. I had been in jail in Indonesia for 15 years over something I did not commit," Veloso, her voice breaking, told reporters after undergoing a medical examination at the Manila prison.

"We call on our president to grant Mary Jane clemency soon. We hope he will do this as a Christmas gift to us," her mother Celia Veloso said.

Marcos thanked Indonesia for turning over custody, but made no mention of a pardon or clemency.

Under the agreement, Veloso's life sentence now falls under the Philippines' purview, "including the authority to grant clemency, remission, amnesty and similar measures".

"Definitely, that's on the table," Justice



Veloso is greeted by her two sons and her father (left) in Manila yesterday. — AFP/ICC

Undersecretary Raul Vasquez told reporters yesterday, adding Veloso's clemency bid would be "seriously studied".

She will serve out her life sentence if not pardoned, Vasquez said.

Indonesia's government has said it will respect any decision made by Manila.

After her scheduled 2015 execution by firing squad was stayed at the last minute, Veloso became a poster child for her country's 10 million-strong economic diaspora.

The reprieve was granted after a woman suspected of recruiting her was arrested on human trafficking charges and Veloso was named as a prosecution witness.

The Veloso deal includes a "reciprocity"

provision. "If Indonesia requests similar assistance in the future, the Philippines shall fulfil such a request," the agreement states.

Before leaving Jakarta, Veloso sang the Indonesian national anthem and proclaimed her love for the country, though she is now banned from ever returning.

"This is a new life for me, and I will have a new beginning in the Philippines," she said.

"I have to go home because I have a family there, I have my children waiting for me," she said, adding she wanted to spend Christmas with them.

"I am very happy today, but to be honest I am a little sad, because Indonesia has been my second family." — Reuters

## Myanmar rebels recapture HQ after almost 30 years

**BANGKOK:** A Myanmar rebel group said on Tuesday it had recaptured its headquarters from the Myanmar military, almost 30 years after it was forced out.

Karen National Union (KNU) fighters had seized Manerplaw on the Thai border following days of fighting, said KNU leader Saw Thamin Tun.

Myanmar troops "still want to take it back and they used drones and tried to bomb our troops", he said.

"But, our troops took the base."

For years Manerplaw was the headquarters of the KNU's decades-long armed struggle for rights for the Karen minority and home to other dissident politicians opposing Myanmar's government.

Following a split within the Christian-majority KNU, the government and a breakaway Buddhist faction captured the base in 1995, sending thousands fleeing into Thailand.

After the fall of Manerplaw, the government renamed the area Kayin state and put the Democratic Kayin Buddhist Organisation, an allied armed group, in charge of it.

The KNU has clashed repeatedly with the government following its latest coup in 2021 and has provided shelter and training to other opponents seeking to topple the military.

Manerplaw "was a historical place for the Karen", said Saw Thamin Tun, with around 100 of its soldiers buried there.

"We need to rebuild the area to pay respect to all of them," he said.

Myanmar has been in turmoil since the 2021 coup, which sparked renewed fighting with rebel groups such as the KNU and birthed dozens of pro-democracy "People's Defence Forces" now battling the military across the country.

More than three million people have been displaced by the fighting according to the United Nations. — AFP

## Yoon fails to appear before graft watchdog

**SEOUL:** Impeached President Yoon Suk Yeol failed to appear before the country's corruption watchdog yesterday, it said, after he was summoned for questioning over his martial law bid.

Yoon was stripped of his duties by parliament over the weekend following his short-lived Dec 3 martial law declaration, which plunged the country into its worst political turmoil in decades.

Investigators from the Corruption Investigation Office (CIO) had summoned him to their facility in Seoul for questioning over charges of insurrection and abuse of power.

"President Yoon did not appear for his summons today," said a CIO official.

Yoon's legal team said on Tuesday he did not commit insurrection and has vowed to fight the charge in court, according to Yonhap news agency.

"While we do not consider the insurrection charges to be legally valid, we will comply with the investigation," said Seok Dong-hyeon, a lawyer representing Yoon.

The CIO said this week that a summons was sent to Yoon but returned "undelivered" after an unidentified person at the presidential office refused to accept it.

Yoon's no-show yesterday "will be considered as a failure to comply with the first summons", a CIO statement said.

Investigators said they were considering despatching a second summons, but CIO chief Oh Dong-woon told parliament on Tuesday they were also "reviewing" whether to issue an arrest warrant.

Yoon is being investigated by South Korean prosecutors as well as a joint team of police, Defence Ministry and anti-corruption investigators. — AFP

## Japan 'regrets' release of anti-whaling activist

**TOKYO:** Japan's government voiced dismay yesterday over the release of anti-whaling activist Paul Watson after Danish authorities refused Tokyo's extradition request.

Greenland arrested the Sea Shepherd founder in July for alleged damages and injuries caused by the group's high-seas battles to stop Japan's "scientific" whale hunts in the 2000s and 2010s.

"It is regrettable that the Denmark government did not accept Japan's request of passing him over and (the government) has conveyed this to the Danish side," said top government spokesman Yoshimasa Hayashi.

"The suspect Paul Watson is wanted as an accomplice of the February 2010 incident where activists of anti-whaling organisation Sea Shepherd injured members of Japanese whalers and damaged properties, after which an arrest warrant was issued," Hayashi said.

"The Japanese government will continue to deal with it appropriately based on law and evidence."

Authorities in Greenland, a Danish autonomous territory, released the 74-year-old Canadian-American on Tuesday after

Copenhagen turned down Tokyo's extradition request.

Watson featured in the reality TV series *Whale Wars* and founded Sea Shepherd and, after being thrown out, the Captain Paul Watson Foundation (CPWF).

He used "direct-action" tactics such as ramming vessels and using acoustic weapons and stink bombs.

In the 2000s and 2010s *Sea Shepherd* played a game of cat and mouse with Japanese ships as they sought to slaughter hundreds of whales every year for "scientific purposes".

Japan eventually halted its hunts in the Antarctic and North Pacific and since 2019 has only caught whales in its territorial waters and exclusive economic zone.

The catch list was limited to sei, minke, and Bryde's whales, but this year fin whales — the planet's second-largest animal — were added and on Aug 1 a kill was recorded.

In May, Japan launched a new "mother ship", the *Kangei Maru*, to butcher the several hundred whales that its fleet catches every year and store the meat.

The CPWF says that its vessel, *John Paul*

*DeJoria*, was on its way to intercept the *Kangei Maru* when Watson was taken away by Danish police on the quayside in Nuuk.

Activists believe that in building the new ship, Japan intends to resume whaling in the Southern Ocean, but the company operating the vessel has denied this.

Watson's arrest attracted major public support, with a petition attracting over 200,000 signatures.

Backers included actress-turned-activist Brigitte Bardot and prominent British conservationist Jane Goodall, who urged French President Emmanuel Macron to grant him political asylum.

Macron pressed Danish authorities not to extradite the campaigner, who applied for French nationality.

Jean Tamalet, one of his lawyers, said "the fight is not over".

"We will now have to challenge the red notice and the Japanese arrest warrant, to ensure that Captain Paul Watson can once again travel the world in complete peace of mind, and never experience a similar episode again," Tamalet said. — AFP

## UTAH FAMILY OF FIVE FOUND SHOT DEAD

SALT LAKE CITY: Five members of a Utah family including children aged two, nine and 11 were found dead of gunshot wounds in their home on Tuesday, while one 17-year-old boy was injured. There were no suspects at large, police said, indicating the shooter was someone within the family. The 17-year-old was in the hospital undergoing treatment. The five dead were a man, 42, a woman, 38, a boy, 11, and two girls ages nine and two. Police had been called to the home in West Valley City, a suburb of Salt Lake City, on Monday by a concerned relative but nobody inside responded and officers looking through the windows found no sign of an emergency or crime. When the woman failed to show at work on Tuesday, relatives entered the home and found the 17-year-old wounded in the garage. — Reuters

## SPACE ONE FAILS AFTER LIFTING OFF

TOKYO: Japan's Space One terminated the flight of its *Kairos* small rocket shortly after liftoff in Wakayama yesterday, marking the end of its second attempt in nine months to become the country's first company to deliver a satellite to space. It is the latest in a series of setbacks for Japanese rocket development, even as the government looks to boost the domestic space industry and is targeting 30 rocket launches annually by the early 2030s. Authorities are pushing to make Japan Asia's space transport hub in what they hope will be an US\$52 billion (RM232 billion) space industry. The second *Kairos* flight, which only lasted about 10 minutes, was terminated because "the achievement of its mission would be difficult," Space One said in an email to reporters. — Reuters

## Starlink inactive in India after second device seized: Musk

NEW DELHI: Elon Musk said Starlink satellite internet is inactive in India, his first comments since authorities seized two of the company's devices in recent weeks, one in an armed conflict zone and another in a drug smuggling bust.

Starlink is seeking approval in India to provide satellite broadband services and the Musk-owned company is trying to address any potential security concerns.

Musk wrote on X late on Tuesday that "Starlink satellite beams are turned off over India" and were "never on in the first place".

He was responding to a post from the Indian Army about a search operation on Dec 13 in Manipur state. The post included photos of seized weapons and a satellite dish and receiver with a Starlink logo.

Two military officers familiar with the operation said the device with the Starlink logo was being used by rebels.

They said the device was likely smuggled through the porous border with Myanmar, where use of Starlink devices by rebels has been documented in media reports. — Reuters

# Woman branded a spy loses case against MI5

## Agency acted lawfully, rules tribunal

LONDON: A woman who was branded a Chinese spy by Britain's MI5 has lost her case to sue the domestic spy agency over an alert issued to politicians which said she was an agent working for Beijing, a London tribunal ruled on Tuesday.

Lawyer Christine Lee had sued MI5 over the alert issued in January 2022 in which it alleged she was "involved in political interference activities" in the United Kingdom on behalf of China's ruling Communist Party.

The warning was circulated to lawmakers by the House of Commons speaker, who said MI5

had found that Lee had "facilitated financial donations to serving and aspiring parliamentarians on behalf of foreign nationals based in Hong Kong and China".

Lee was born in Hong Kong and founded a firm providing consultancy services to Chinese migrants. She helped set up a parliamentary committee, chaired by Barry Gardiner, a lawmaker for the then opposition Labour Party, designed to discuss issues affecting the Chinese community in Britain.

Gardiner said he had received hundreds of thousands of pounds in donations from her, and her son had worked in his office.

She denied the MI5 allegations and sued the spy agency for damages, arguing the agency had acted unlawfully and unreasonably by labelling her a risk to the state

without any finding of guilt.

But the Investigatory Powers Tribunal rejected the claim brought by Lee and her son. It said MI5 was within its rights to issue the Interference Alert as part of its function to protect parliamentary democracy and that the pair's human rights had not been breached.

Lee's lawyer said in a statement that his clients were extremely disappointed and were "considering their options".

"Although the Investigatory Powers Tribunal's judgment did not determine whether the espionage allegations made against Christine Lee were factually true or false, we reiterate that Christine Lee has not engaged in such activities," the statement said.

In evidence given to the tribunal,

Gardiner had queried whether the timing of the alert was to divert attention from former prime minister Boris Johnson's admission of an unlawful gathering at Downing Street during a lockdown.

Tuesday's ruling came a day after a Chinese national, described in a ruling by the Special Immigration Appeals Commission as a "close confidant" of Prince Andrew and banned from Britain on national security grounds, waived his right to anonymity.

While British Prime Minister Keir Starmer has sought to thaw ties with China since taking office in July, London and Beijing have repeatedly traded spying accusations, with British security services warning of Chinese attempts to infiltrate political, business and academic spheres. — Reuters



Madison residents attend a vigil at the state Capitol grounds on Tuesday to mourn the victims of the shooting. — AFP/IC

## Police look for motive in female shooter case

MADISON: Police here were interviewing friends and family and examining the online presence of a 15-year-old girl to determine what drove her to open fire at her private school, killing a fellow student and a teacher before taking her own life.

The shooter, identified by police as Natalie Rupnow, who also went by Samantha, was a student at the Abundant Life Christian School in Madison, Wisconsin.

"Identifying a motive is our top priority," Madison Police Chief Shon Barnes told a news conference.

Barnes did not provide more

details, saying he didn't want to jeopardise the investigation.

Investigators are examining the girl's cell phone, computer and online posts as well as looking into verifying a possible manifesto that the shooter may have left behind.

Some details of Rupnow's life have begun to emerge.

Police have confirmed the name of the street where she lived in Madison. Online records show a person named Jeffrey Rupnow lives on the same street, and a Facebook profile belonging to a Jeff Rupnow in Madison shows photos of a

newborn daughter named Natalie Lynn from 2009, 15 years ago.

Jeff Rupnow's cover photo, posted in August, shows what appears to be a teenaged girl trap shooting with a shotgun at a club.

Monday's shooting took place in a study hall classroom of the small, private school. Two students remained in critical condition on Tuesday, while several other victims suffered less serious injuries, officials said.

Police said Rupnow used a pistol, but have not said how it was obtained. — Reuters

## Vanuatu quake death toll rises to 14

WELLINGTON: People remained trapped in a collapsed building in Vanuatu's capital Port Vila yesterday a day after a 7.4 magnitude earthquake struck the Pacific nation, killing 14 people including two Chinese nationals.

Three people were communicating with rescue teams from beneath the rubble of one building, while two survivors had been pulled from the ruins of another, Police Commissioner Robson Lavro said.

"We believe there are more stuck inside," Lavro said in a video message.

As aftershocks continued to rattle the island nation of 330,000 people, footage posted on social media showed vehicles crushed under the debris, boulders strewn across a highway and landslides near Port Vila's shipping terminal.

National broadcaster VBTC showed people queuing for fuel and essentials as power, water and communications were disrupted.

There were 14 confirmed deaths including four in one collapsed building, the National Disaster Management office said in a report.

More than 200 people were injured, police said, and triage tents were set up outside Port Vila's hospital to manage the influx of patients.

Unicef Chief of Field Office in Vanuatu Eric Durpaire said water contamination was a major concern.

China's ambassador confirmed two Chinese nationals were among the dead.

Caretaker Prime Minister Charlot Salwai said a national disaster committee has declared a state of emergency and imposed a curfew for seven days in the worst-affected areas. International assistance has been sought. — Reuters



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SCAN ME





Displaced Palestinians wait patiently at a food distribution centre south of Khan Younis on Tuesday. – AFP/IC

**CAIRO:** The United States, joined by Arab mediators, sought yesterday to conclude an agreement between Israel and Hamas to halt the 14-month-old war in the Gaza Strip where medics said Israeli strikes killed at least 20 Palestinians overnight.

A Palestinian official close to the negotiations said yesterday that mediators had narrowed gaps on most of the agreement's clauses. He said Israel had introduced conditions which Hamas rejected but would not elaborate.

On Tuesday, sources close to the talks in Cairo, the Egyptian capital, said an agreement could be signed in coming days on a ceasefire and release of hostages held in Gaza in return for Palestinian prisoners held by Israel.

Medics said an Israeli airstrike killed at least 10 people in a house in the northern town of Beit Lahiya while six were killed in separate airstrikes in Gaza City, Nuseirat camp and Rafah.

## Gaza mediators intensify ceasefire efforts

▶ CIA director Burns in Doha to bridge gaps

In Beit Hanoun in the northern Gaza Strip, medics said four people were killed in an airstrike on a house. There was no immediate comment from the Israeli military spokesman.

Israeli forces have operated in the towns of Beit Hanoun and Beit Lahiya as well as the nearby Jabalia camp since October, in a campaign the military said aimed to prevent gunmen from regrouping.

Palestinians accuse Israel of

carrying out acts of "ethnic cleansing" to depopulate the northern edge of the enclave to create a buffer zone. Israel denies it.

On Wednesday, the Israeli military said they struck a number of gunmen planning an attack against Israeli forces operating in Jabalia.

The US administration, joined by mediators from Egypt and Qatar, has made intensive efforts in recent days to advance the talks before President

Joe Biden leaves office next month.

In Jerusalem, Israeli President Isaac Herzog met Adam Boehler, US President-elect Donald Trump's designated envoy for hostage affairs.

CIA Director William Burns arrived in Doha for talks with Qatari Prime Minister Sheikh Mohammed bin Abdulrahman Al Thani on bridging remaining gaps between Israel and Hamas, other knowledgeable sources said.

Israeli negotiators were in Doha on Monday looking to bridge gaps between Israel and Hamas on a deal Biden outlined in May. – Reuters

## Palestinian families sue State Dept over support for Israeli military

**WASHINGTON:** Palestinian families sued the US State Department on Tuesday over Washington's support for Israel's military amid its war in Gaza that has killed tens of thousands and caused a humanitarian crisis, a court filing showed.

The lawsuit filed in the District of Columbia alleged that the State Department under Secretary of State Antony Blinken has deliberately circumvented a US human rights law to continue funding and supporting Israeli military units accused of atrocities in Gaza and the Israeli-occupied West Bank.

The Leahy Laws prohibit providing US military assistance to individuals or security force units that commit gross violations of human rights and have not been brought to justice. Both South Africa at the World Court and Amnesty International have accused Israel of committing genocide and war crimes. Israel has denied the charges.

Washington faces criticism from human rights groups for maintaining its support for Israel with no major policy changes.

"The State Department's calculated failure to apply the Leahy Law is particularly shocking in the face of the unprecedented escalation of Israeli gross violations of human rights since the Gaza War erupted on Oct 7, 2023," the lawsuit said.

Israel's war in Gaza has killed over 45,000 people. Israel's assault has also displaced nearly Gaza's entire 2.3 million population and caused a hunger crisis.

The lawsuit was filed by five Palestinians in Gaza, the West Bank and the United States. The lead plaintiff was a Gaza teacher who has been displaced seven times in the war and lost 20 family members.

The State Department referred reporters to the Justice Department, which had no comment. – Reuters

## Syria conflict not over yet, warns UN special envoy

**DAMASCUS:** A UN envoy has warned that Syria's protracted conflict "has not ended yet", even as victorious rebels stepped up contacts with foreign governments.

President Bashar al-Assad fled Syria just over a week ago following a lightning offensive spearheaded by the Hayat Tahrir al-Sham (HTS).

However, the UN special envoy for

Syria, Geir Pedersen, said on Tuesday "there have been significant hostilities in the last two weeks, before a ceasefire was brokered".

Kurdish SDF leader Mazloum Abdi proposed in a post on X the establishment of a "demilitarised zone" in Kobane under US supervision.

Washington regards the SDF as an

important ally in its war against the IS group in Syria, although the new Damascus authorities have made clear their opposition to continued Kurdish self-rule in the northeast.

The HTS military chief said on Tuesday that Kurdish-held areas of Syria would be integrated under the country's new leadership.

"The Kurdish people are one of the

components of the Syrian people ... Syria will not be divided and there will be no federal entities," said Murhaf Abu Qasra, known by his *nom de guerre* Abu Hassan al-Hamawi.

He called on the international community to "find a solution" to Israeli strikes on military targets and its "incursion" into the UN-patrolled buffer zone on the Golan Heights.

Israel has carried out hundreds of strikes on Syrian military assets since Assad's overthrow in what it says is a bid to prevent them falling into hostile hands.

Israeli troops also occupied strategic positions in a UN-patrolled buffer zone in a move UN chief Antonio Guterres described as a breach of the 1974 armistice. – AFP

## Russia detains suspect over murder of general

**MOSCOW:** Russia said yesterday it had detained an Uzbek man who had confessed to planting and detonating a bomb which killed a top general, Igor Kirillov, in Moscow on the instructions of Ukraine's SBU security service.

Kirillov, who was chief of Russia's Nuclear, Biological and Chemical Protection Troops, was killed outside his apartment building on Tuesday along with his assistant when a bomb hidden in an electric scooter went off.

He is the most senior Russian military officer to be assassinated in Russia by Ukraine. Ukraine's SBU

intelligence service took responsibility for the killing after Ukraine accused Kirillov of being responsible for the use of chemical weapons against Ukrainian troops – something Moscow denies.

Russia's Investigative Committee said in a statement yesterday that the suspect had told them he had come to Moscow to carry out an assignment for Ukraine's intelligence services.

In a video published by the Baza news outlet, which is known to have sources in Russian law-enforcement circles, the suspect is seen sitting in a van describing his actions.

It was not clear under what conditions he was speaking and Reuters could not immediately verify the video's authenticity.

Dressed in a winter coat, the suspect is shown saying he had come to Moscow at the orders of Ukraine's intelligence services, bought an electric scooter and received an improvised explosive device.

He describes placing the device on the electric scooter and parking it outside the apartment block where Kirillov lived.

Investigators cited him as saying he set up a surveillance camera in a

hire car which, they said, was watched in the Ukrainian city of Dnipro by people who organised the killing.

The suspect, who is thought to have been born in 1995, is shown saying he remotely detonated the device when Kirillov left the building. He says Ukraine had offered him US\$100,000 (RM446,954) and residency in a European country.

Investigators said they were identifying other people involved, and the *Kommersant* newspaper reported that one other suspect had been detained.

Maria Zakharova, a spokeswoman

for Russia's Foreign Ministry, said Moscow would raise the assassination at the UN Security Council tomorrow.

Everyone involved in the killing would be found and punished, and Moscow would not be intimidated, she said.

"We see that the Kyiv regime has taken responsibility once again for a terrorist attack. All these SBU losers and the mad Kiev regime are all tools managed by the Anglo-Saxons," she said, using a term Russia uses to describe the United States and Britain.

"They are the main beneficiaries of Kyiv's terrorism." – Reuters



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COMMENT by Assoc Prof Dr Nahrizul Adib Kadri

# Striking balanced look on university rankings

**A** RECENT critique of Malaysian universities' obsession with rankings headlined "Malaysian universities' futile chase for ranking" in *theSun*, raises important points, especially regarding how the pursuit of these metrics can overshadow the core mission of institutions.

However, as academicians, we are trained to evaluate issues using the correct lens. Yes, while rankings may not be a perfect system, they are not without merit.

A balanced discourse on this subject would not only highlight the flaws but also acknowledge the potential benefits rankings bring to our universities.

There is no denying that the chase for rankings can divert resources and focus away from what truly matters - quality education, meaningful research and community contributions.

The writer rightly points out that celebrating marginal ranking improvements, such as moving from 469th to 463rd, can feel misplaced if fundamental issues within our universities remain unaddressed.

His call to focus on strengthening the basics - improving student input and ensuring academic and research relevance - is well-founded. After all, rankings are only as meaningful as the quality they reflect.

However, dismissing rankings entirely overlooks the opportunities they present. At their best, rankings provide benchmarks that allow universities to identify areas for growth.

For Malaysian institutions aspiring to compete on a global stage, rankings can help attract international partnerships, research funding and talented lecturers

and students. They serve as external motivators, pushing universities to continuously improve their teaching standards, research output and infrastructure.

Therefore, the key is not to abandon rankings in their entirety but to engage with them critically, using them as a tool to guide our progress.

Take, for example, Universiti Malaya's recent performance in the QS World University Rankings: Asia, where it achieved 12th place. Beyond the celebration, this milestone reflects years of hard work in improving research capacity, fostering collaborations and attracting international students. These are tangible improvements that benefit not just the university, but also the broader Malaysian academic ecosystem.

*"The key is not to abandon rankings in their entirety but to engage with them critically, using them as a tool to guide our progress."*

It is also worth noting that rankings like QS include diverse metrics, such as employer reputation and internationalisation, which, while imperfect, provide some insight into how institutions prepare their students for the real world.

The writer's critique of local research relevance is another valid point that deserves attention. The lack of rigorous studies on issues

critical to Malaysia, such as financial mismanagement or leveraging our extensive coastline for marine biology research, is indeed a missed opportunity.

However, this is not necessarily a flaw in rankings themselves. It reflects deeper issues in research priorities and funding allocations within our universities. Instead of dismissing rankings outright, perhaps they can be leveraged to incentivise research that addresses both national challenges and global frontiers.

What is more, comparing rankings to

a superficial fashion contest, as the writer did in his article, risks oversimplifying the conversation. Universities are complex institutions with diverse stakeholders, and rankings are just one lens through which they can be evaluated.

It is not about choosing between chasing rankings and focusing on fundamentals. The two can coexist. By addressing fundamental issues, such as improving student intake, strengthening academic hiring criteria and enhancing research relevance, Malaysian universities can naturally rise in rankings as a by-product of their genuine quality.

As academicians, we also have a responsibility to foster balanced discussions. The writer's argument against rankings could have been strengthened by acknowledging their positive aspects, even while critiquing their flaws.

After all, ranking systems are not inherently bad - they are tools. How we use these tools determines whether they become a distraction or a driver of meaningful progress.

Ultimately, the focus for our universities should be clear: to serve students, communities (including global stakeholders) and the nation.

Rankings can provide useful insights but they should never overshadow the larger purpose of education. At the same time, let us not dismiss the value they bring, particularly in showcasing progress and attracting global attention.

The challenge lies in finding a middle ground. If we approach rankings with a critical yet open mind, we can use them to complement efforts to improve the fundamentals of Malaysian universities. By doing so, we can aim for a higher purpose - not just a higher ranking.

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LETTERS letters@thesundaily.com

## Levelling up Malaysia's data centre potential

**SOUTHEAST** Asia is a data centre goldmine, and Malaysia is poised to seize a significant share. However, to compete with regional rivals like Singapore, we need to refine our strategies and double down on our strengths.

Singapore's established green data centre standard has set a high bar for the region, attracting environmentally conscious companies, with its clear focus on energy efficiency.

While Malaysia is developing its power usage effectiveness guidelines, we have a unique opportunity to leapfrog ahead by incorporating cutting-edge sustainability practices from the outset.

This could position Malaysia as a leader in green data centre development.

On cybersecurity, both nations recognise the critical importance of protecting sensitive data. Malaysia's newly enacted Cyber Security Act 2024 provides a foundation, but its effectiveness remains to be seen.

Given its recent implementation, it is crucial to ensure robust enforcement and proactive engagement with the industry.

This will not only address potential vulnerabilities but also build confidence that Malaysia is committed to creating a secure and trustworthy environment for data centre operations.

A clear demonstration of this commitment will be

essential for attracting global players and investors in the data centre sector.

Both countries require environmental impact assessments for large-scale data centres.

However, Malaysia's EIA (Environmental Impact Assessment) process is based on legislation from 1974 - long before the data centre boom.

While this provides a general framework, we need to develop more tailored assessment criteria that address the specific environmental challenges posed by data centres, including energy consumption, water usage and waste management.

Singapore's call-for-application scheme streamlines planning and aligns growth with sustainability goals.

Malaysia can create an equally effective system, tailored to our unique context, providing clarity and efficiency in the development process to attract greater investment.

Malaysia has all the ingredients for success in the data centre arena: strategic location, robust infrastructure and a growing technology talent pool.

By strategically refining our regulatory landscape and showcasing our commitment to sustainability and security, we can unlock our full potential and become a global data centre leader.

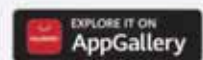
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# True class is rooted in values

**W**HAT does it mean to act with class? The term may evoke ideas of sophistication, elegance or a polished demeanour.

However, true class is much deeper – it is an embodiment of grace, fairness and respect, especially in challenging situations.

Acting with class is less about appearances and more about values. It is not something dictated by age, education or worldly wisdom, although these qualities may play a part. Instead, it requires a deeper sense of emotional intelligence, empathy and an unwavering commitment to treating others with dignity.

We often associate certain traits with wisdom – academic achievements, professional success or the accumulation of life experiences.

We assume that age naturally brings fairness, patience and understanding. Yet, many of us have encountered situations where individuals who should “know better” behave in ways that seem petty, controlling or unfair.

This disconnect serves as a reminder: acting with class is not automatically granted with education or maturity. It is a conscious choice.

True class is not defined by social position, wealth or years of experience. Instead, it is measured by how one chooses to treat others, especially in moments of disagreement or conflict.

It is evident in the ability to rise above self-interest and treat others with respect, even when the circumstances make it difficult.

Acting with class is about more than just maintaining composure. It involves a set of values that guide how we interact with others, especially when the power dynamic is in our favour.

The following qualities are at the heart of class:

➤ **Grace in conflict:** Acting with class requires handling difficult situations with composure. It means resisting the urge to lash out or retaliate, even when provoked. Grace under pressure shows strength and emotional intelligence.

➤ **Fairness and empathy:** Classy behaviour is rooted in fairness. It means understanding another's perspective and ensuring that your actions do not undermine their dignity. Empathy is the bridge that allows us to see others not as obstacles but as individuals worthy of respect.

➤ **Respect for boundaries:** People who act with class respect agreements, contracts and boundaries. They do not demand more than is fair, nor do they use their position to impose unnecessary burdens on others.

➤ **Trust and good faith:** A person acting with class assumes the best in others until proven otherwise. They approach interactions with good faith, rather than suspicion or control.

➤ **Humility in power:** Class is most

evident when one holds power. Whether in a position of authority or advantage, acting with humility and fairness rather than wielding control demonstrates a true understanding of class.

When these qualities are absent, relationships and interactions often become transactional or strained. Without grace and fairness, even routine situations can devolve into conflict.

The inability to act with class often stems from insecurity, distrust or a need to exert control. These behaviours not only undermine others but also diminish the person displaying them.

On the other hand, class is not about winning or being right. It is about embodying values like trust, empathy and fairness, even when it would be easier not to. This quiet strength can transform conflict into collaboration and build respect where there may otherwise be resentment.

In today's fast-paced and often polarised world, acting with class is a rare but vital quality. It challenges us to rise above petty disputes and self-interest, focusing instead on the bigger picture: building trust, fostering respect and maintaining integrity.

Class is not about perfection or always getting it right. It is about the effort to treat others – and oneself – with dignity and respect.

Acting with class is especially important in situations where power dynamics come into play. Whether as a landlord, a manager or a teacher, those in positions of authority have a responsibility to uphold fairness and model grace.

Acting with class is not an innate trait, nor is it tied to education, age or experience. It is a daily choice to prioritise respect over ego, fairness over power and dignity over convenience. It requires self-awareness and a commitment to values that transcend the momentary satisfaction of being right or in control.

The next time you face a challenging situation, ask yourself: Am I acting with class? Consider whether your actions reflect the person you aspire to be.

In the end, acting with class is not about what others think of you – it is about the legacy of integrity and grace you leave behind.

As we navigate life's complexities, let us strive to act with class, not because it is easy, but because it is right. For in the quiet strength of fairness and respect, we can find the true essence of wisdom – and of ourselves.

*Dr Praveena Rajendra is a certified mental health and awareness practitioner specialising in narcissistic abuse recovery. Comments: letters@thesundaily.com*



*“Acting with class is not an innate trait, nor is it tied to education, age or experience. It is a daily choice to prioritise respect over ego, fairness over power and dignity over convenience.”*

## LETTERS letters@thesundaily.com

### Importance of centralised exams over school-based tests

THE Education Ministry abolished the national centralised exams UPSR in 2021 and PT3 in 2022. These were replaced with end-of-academic-session test.

However, centralised exams have the following unique benefits.

➤ **Standardisation and fairness:** Centralised exams provide standardised metrics across schools, allowing a fair comparison of students' abilities. Without a common assessment, differences in teaching quality, resources and grading standards could lead to inconsistent results. Centralised exams help maintain an objective measure, ensuring that students across the country are assessed on a level playing field.

➤ **Mitigation of bias:** School-based assessments can be susceptible to unconscious bias as teachers may favour or penalise students based on subjective factors. Centralised exams are usually anonymous and are graded by external assessors, reducing the potential for bias and personal relationships to affect scores, thus providing a more impartial evaluation of student ability.

➤ **Preparation for high-stake environments:** Centralised exams are high-pressure environments that mirror the type of challenges students will encounter in higher education and in their careers, where they are often required to demonstrate their knowledge and skills under time constraints. The experience of studying for and taking standardised tests will help students develop discipline, time management and stress-handling skills that can be invaluable later in life.

➤ **Higher accountability and rigorous standards:** Centralised exams hold schools accountable to national or regional academic standards. Without such exams, there may be variations in rigour across schools, potentially allowing some students to graduate without mastering key skills. Exams create a measurable outcome for what students should know, encouraging schools to maintain high standards of teaching and learning.

➤ **Reduction of grade inflation:** School-based assessments can lead to grade inflation over time as



Centralised exams provide standardised metrics across schools, allowing a fair comparison of students' abilities. – ADIB RAWI YAHYA/THESUN

teachers may feel pressured to give higher grades to avoid negative feedback from parents or administrators. Centralised exams help counteract this by providing an objective, external benchmark that prevents schools from overinflating grades.

➤ **Objectivity in university and job applications:** Universities and employers often rely on exam results as a reliable indicator of a candidate's knowledge and potential. Centralised exams provide a straightforward, comparative measure of student ability. Replacing them with school-based assessments would make it harder for universities and employers to evaluate applicants objectively, impacting students' opportunities.

In conclusion, while school-based assessments are valuable for providing ongoing feedback and supporting learning, centralised exams play a critical role in ensuring fairness, accountability and standardisation across the education system.

Replacing centralised exams with school-based assessments alone may lead to inconsistencies, reduced rigour and a potential loss of public trust in educational outcomes.

Therefore, a balanced approach that includes both forms of assessment would likely serve students best.

**Liong Kam Chong**  
Seremban

**Nik Imran Nik Hussein**  
Johor Bahru

### Scrap insurance premium hike and RM1 withdrawal fee

THE prices of almost everything in the country are rising, while, unfortunately, our wages remain stagnant.

While we can partly blame the global economy for the spiralling living costs, there are measures our government can take to help.

Most importantly, the government must intervene and halt the proposed increase in insurance premiums set to take effect next year. If not stopped, this could have a dramatic boomerang effect, leading to severe negative consequences.

For one, more Malaysians will be forced to turn to public healthcare and this will surely put a strain on doctors, nurses and our public health facilities as a whole.

There are no reports of any insurance companies running into losses, so there is no justification at all for this increase. Additionally, no private hospital has ever faced losses severe enough to force a closure.

Another way the government can help the people, especially those in the lower income group, is by putting an end to the RM1 interbank withdrawal fee.

I never paid much attention to the RM1 fee until the National Union of Bank Employees recently highlighted how this small amount can quickly add up to millions.

Private hospitals, insurance companies and most banks are highly profitable entities that never seem to run dry. These organisations should focus on giving back to society, rather than constantly squeezing the rakyat for every last bit.

I urge our prime minister to put an end to the proposed insurance premium hikes and the RM1 withdrawal fee. The rakyat is struggling. Do not tie boulders to our feet and make things worse.

# Mah Sing acquires land in Johor to build M Tiara 3

○ Plans to develop township of super-linked homes with estimated GDV of RM463m

**KUALA LUMPUR:** Mah Sing Group Bhd acquired 59.12 acres of freehold land in Mukim Pulai, Johor Bahru for RM62.98 million.

The new land will be named M Tiara 3 and is planned for the development of super-linked homes with an estimated GDV of approximately RM463 million.

This marks the group's third acquisition in Mukim Pulai, following the purchase of 100.4 acres of land in April 2024 named M Tiara 2 and the 75.7 acres M Tiara acquired in June 2023.

Based on preliminary plans and subject to authorities' approval, M Tiara 3 is envisioned to be a township comprising spacious super-

linked homes with indicative built-ups of 22'x70', 24'x70' and 28'x60' respectively, and with indicative starting price from RM780,000.

Mah Sing founder and group managing director Tan Sri Leong Hoy Kum said, "We believe that there is booming demand for properties in Johor, hence this acquisition presents a good opportunity for us to continue to expand our presence in this area. During the Budget 2025 announcement, the government also announced to prioritise public interest and facilities that support industrial areas based on state priorities, such as the Johor-Singapore Rapid Transit System (RTS) project, which is slated to begin operations in 2027. This is likely to spur the interest for properties in Johor. In addition, the tax relief on housing loan interest of RM7,000 and RM5,000 for first-time homebuyers will make homeownership more accessible."

"This can be further proven with the success of M Tiara, our landed residential project located in the same area. To date, M Tiara has

attracted over 14,000 registrations of interest and achieved a 100% take-up rate for international lots in its first two phases, while M Tiara 2 will be open for registration of interest soon. Other than that, M Minori located in Taman Seri Austin, which is our first M Series development in the southern region, received overwhelming response from homebuyers where its international lots for all three towers achieved a 99% take-up rate. As such, we will continue to look for strategic lands in Johor to develop townships, M Series projects and industrial projects," he added.

M Tiara 3 is envisioned as an upgraded version of the group's M Series developments, offering larger and premium concept landed residential units to cater to a wider range of homebuyers.

Johor is Mah Sing's second largest development region after Klang Valley. The group launched its first township in Johor in 2000 and has continuously expanded its presence in the southern region with multiple project launches ranging from high-rise to landed, commercial and industrial developments. To date, the group has sold approximately 17,000 units of residential, commercial and industrial developments in Johor alone.



Source : Google Map & Mah Sing

Savvy @ Riana Dutamas completed ahead of schedule, handover of units begins

**PETALING JAYA:** Savvy @ Riana Dutamas, a thoughtfully designed development by IJM Land and FCW Holdings Bhd, has reached a significant milestone by completing its serviced residences ahead of schedule and delivering vacant possession to homeowners.

Situated in the burgeoning township of Segambut, this freehold property marks a significant achievement in IJM Land's portfolio, offering modern urban living and a potentially savvy investment opportunity.

Savvy @ Riana Dutamas has a GDV of RM590 million and sits on 5.06 acres of prime land. The development has also earned the prestigious GreenRE Bronze certification in recognition of its sustainable features, including an impressive QLASSIC rating of 85%.

The development features 921 serviced apartments, with units sold at starting prices from RM454,000. The residences are available in various layouts ranging from 722 sq ft (2-bedroom) cosy units to spacious 1,232 sq ft (3-bedroom + studio dual-key) designs, catering to both young professionals and even multi-generational families. Each unit is allocated 2 to three car parks, ensuring residents that they have sufficient access to parking.

"Savvy @ Riana Dutamas offers the perfect balance between city living and a home that's like a peaceful retreat. Our vision was to create a development that speaks to the needs of both the young and the young at heart, whether they are looking for a dynamic lifestyle in the city or seeking a secure and smart investment option. With its strategic location in Segambut and an emphasis on community-driven and interactive spaces, Savvy offers the optimal urban lifestyle – providing residents with a serene sense of calm and peace of mind when they return home," said IJM Land senior general manager Datuk Chai Kian Soon.

## Tropicana launches Fraser Heights in Tropicana Uplands

**JOHOR BHARU:** The 313-acre Tropicana Uplands is one of Tropicana Corporation Bhd's signature townships in Johor.

Last month, Tropicana Uplands hosted a soft launch to introduce Fraser Heights, its latest landed residential phase. The event attracted more than 1,000 visitors and registrants.

Tropicana Uplands is a sustainable township boasting work-live-learn-shop-play components with connectivity to five major highways. The purchasers of Fraser Heights will enjoy the same amenities and facilities from schools, golf clubs, theme parks, medical facilities, shopping, departmental stores, and the 19-acre central park comprising of a football field, multi-purpose courts, bicycle track, jogging track, outdoor gym, playground and pedestrian walkways.

Strategically located in the international zone of Iskandar Malaysia, Tropicana Uplands is poised to be the new pulse of Gelang Patah as it is surrounded by matured residential and commercial properties with an estimated projected population of 140,000.

Fraser Heights is the latest phase of modern and upper-class development within Tropicana Uplands. Consisting of 2- and 3-storey terrace homes, the 36-acre development is surrounded by various amenities. Its close proximity to Singapore and the Malaysia-Singapore Second Link makes it ideal for Malaysians working in Singapore, Singaporeans, and families looking to upgrade their homes.

## Radium buys Ampang site for its first project outside KL

**KUALA LUMPUR:** Radium Development Bhd has acquired 2.56-acre leasehold parcel in Bandar Ampang, Selangor, through its indirect wholly owned subsidiary Mayang Sepakat Sdn Bhd.

This strategic move, marking Radium's first project outside Kuala Lumpur, aligns with the company's expansion plan and strengthens its foothold in key Klang Valley locations, reinforcing its commitment to creating well-connected, high-value properties.

The newly acquired site, located near Kuala Lumpur City Centre and directly accessible by major highways and the Cempaka LRT station, represents a promising transit oriented development (TOD) opportunity for Radium, with direct appeal to urban residents and businesses seeking accessibility.

The site is planned for a mixed-use development featuring around 1,128 residential units including 340 affordable Service Apartment Mampu Milik units and commercial spaces. The project carries a GDV of RM470 million.

In a statement, Radium said that it will fund the RM45 million acquisition via a prudent mix of internal funds and bank financing. This balance underscores Radium's financial strength and ensures continuity in its growth-driven strategy for sustainable, high-value developments.

The acquisition aligns with Radium's long-term strategy to secure prime urban land in high-demand areas. The property's location within the TOD zone – just 350m from Cempaka LRT station and well-connected by major thoroughfares – supports Radium's focus on sustainable urban

living spaces in growth corridors, enhancing Radium's pipeline of projects aimed at Klang Valley's growing urban population.

Group managing director Datuk Gary Gan Kah Siong shared his enthusiasm for the project's potential: "The acquisition represents a cornerstone in Radium's growth strategy. This project is ideally positioned to meet increasing demand for high-quality, accessible urban spaces in Klang Valley and signals our commitment to creating sustainable, long-term value for our shareholders."

The company is confident this acquisition will contribute positively to its future earnings and reinforce its market leadership in strategic property development within the Klang Valley region.



## Berjaya Corp-led consortium stays committed to KL-S'pore High Speed Rail project

**KUALA LUMPUR:** The Berjaya Corporation Bhd-led consortium which took part in MyHSR's Request for Information exercise for the Kuala Lumpur-Singapore High-Speed Rail (KL-SG HSR) project announced yesterday that Malaysian Resources Corporation Bhd (MRCB), one of its partners, has decided to leave the consortium to focus on other strategic opportunities.



As a result, MRCB will no longer be part of the KL-SG HSR Consortium. "The consortium which includes Berjaya Rail Sdn Bhd, Keretapi Tanah Melayu Bhd (KTMB), IJM Corporation Bhd (IJM) and our technical partners such as Deutsche Bahn, Hitachi Rail and Hyundai Rotem will be further strengthened, better aligned with the project's evolving needs, and will meet the government's expectations," Berjaya Corporation said in a statement.

The company said the consortium and its technical partners are recognised leaders in infrastructure development, engineering, and transport management.

Collectively, they bring decades of proven expertise in delivering large-scale infrastructure projects.

"We remain steadfast in our mission to deliver a world-class HSR system that will transform regional connectivity and economic development for Malaysia and to help the nation's successful transition towards green mobility in the form of the high-speed rail," Berjaya Corporation founder and adviser Tan Sri Vincent Tan Chee Yiuon said.

# Malaysia's trade continues to improve in November

**PETALING JAYA:** Malaysia's trade performance continued to grow steadily in November 2024, with increases in exports and imports reflecting a stronger economic climate, the Department of Statistics Malaysia reported yesterday.

Total trade increased 2.9% to RM237.8 billion from RM231.1 billion recorded in the previous year, driven by growth in exports by 4.1% to RM126.6 billion and imports by 1.6%, reaching RM111.3 billion.

The trade balance improved by 26.3% to RM15.3 billion in November, the 55th consecutive month of surplus since May 2020.

Chief Statistician Malaysia Datuk Seri Dr Mohd Uzir Mahidin said exports increased in line with the rise in domestic exports in November.

## Exports and imports increase, 55th consecutive month of surplus since May 2020

Domestic exports, which made up 83.3% of total exports, rose by 10.3% compared to November 2023, reaching RM105.4 billion. However, re-exports, which account for 16.7% of total exports, fell 18.7% to RM21.2 billion.

Compared to October 2024, exports, imports and total trade narrowed 1.2%, 4.3% and 2.7%, respectively.

On the contrary, the trade balance recorded an improvement of 28.8%.

A segmental breakdown shows 123 out of 259 export groups and 129 out of 258 import groups showed increases compared to the same month of the previous year.

Mohd Uzir said higher exports were attributable mainly to shipments to the United States (+RM7.4 billion), followed by Taiwan (+RM2.5 billion), Kenya (+RM645.2 million), India (+RM497.9 million), Bangladesh (+RM382.4 million), Mexico (+RM265.9 million) and New Zealand (+RM220.9 million).

Higher imports were mainly inbound from China (+RM2.3 billion), followed by Taiwan (+RM2.1 billion), Mexico (+RM784.5 million), Chad (+RM659.8 million), India (+RM460.6 million), Switzerland (+RM410.8 million) and Cameroon (+RM375.3 million).

Commenting on exports, Mohd Uzir said the increase was in line

with the rise in electrical and electronic products (+RM5.6 billion), other manufactures (+RM2.3 billion), palm oil and palm-based agriculture products (+RM1.2 billion), machinery, equipment, and parts (+RM1.2 billion), rubber products (+RM406.3 million), chemical and chemical products (+RM365.6 million), and jewellery (+RM270.2 million).

Imports saw increases in several categories, including electrical and electronic products (+RM6.6 billion), other agricultural products (+RM536.1 million), other vegetable oils (+RM358.1 million), processed food (+RM286.8 million), liquefied natural gas (+RM189.6 million), and other manufactured goods (+RM185.1 million).

Mohd Uzir pointed to the upsurge in imports by end-use, which was in accordance with higher demand for intermediate goods and consumption goods.

Imports of intermediate goods (56.8% of total imports), valued at RM63.3 billion, increased 12.7%, or RM7.1 billion, compared to November 2023. Consumption goods (9.1% of total imports) increased by 3.5%, or RM343.2 million, to RM10.1 billion.

On the contrary, capital goods (11.9% of total imports), valued at RM13.3 billion, decreased by 10%, or RM1.5 billion.

Total trade for the period of January to November 2024 registered an increase of 8.7% from RM2.4 trillion to RM2.6 trillion, in line with the rise in exports (+4.7%) and imports (+13.3%).

On the contrary, the trade surplus for the 11 months decreased by 42% compared to the same period in 2023, with a value of RM117.9 billion.



Total trade for the period of January to November 2024 registered an increase of 8.7% from RM2.4 trillion to RM2.6 trillion. — **BERNAMAPIC**

## Scientex starts FY25 with RM128.6m net profit in first quarter

**PETALING JAYA:** Scientex Bhd, a packaging manufacturer and property developer, achieved revenue of RM1.1 billion and net profit of RM128.6 million for the first quarter ended Oct 31, 2024 (Q1'25).

Group revenue remained consistent with the RM1.1 billion in the previous corresponding quarter.

The property division was the key performance driver, with revenue rising 6% to RM483.7 million from RM456.1 million previously, driven by steady construction progress across the northern, central, Malacca and Johor regions, coupled with strong take-up rates for ongoing projects.

The packaging division recorded RM625.7 million in revenue, a slight decline of 3.8% from RM650.4 million previously. This was mainly due to

softer demand from the export market and unfavourable foreign currency exchange movements.

Despite a 6.7% decline in net profit compared to RM137.8 million the previous year, the strong performance of the property division bolstered the group's overall profitability.

Scientex CEO Lim Peng Jin said the property division continues to benefit from robust demand for affordable homes.

He said that by focusing on strategically located projects and expanding its portfolio of quality, cost-effective homes, Scientex is able to meet market demand while improving housing accessibility.

"In packaging, we are navigating a challenging global economic environment by focusing on innovation,

operational efficiency enhancement, and sustainability. This includes developing customised, value-added packaging solutions, with emphasis on incorporating recycled materials as our customers increasingly adopt sustainable practices.

"With our twin-engine growth strategy from packaging and property, Scientex is committed to driving long-term growth, underpinned by our focus on innovation, operational excellence, and market expansion," he said.

Scientex's property division continues to experience robust demand, driven by the need for affordable housing.

In Q1'25, the group recorded encouraging take-up rates for recent launches in Scientex Jenjarom

(Selangor), Scientex Sungai Dua (Penang), Scientex Ipoh (Perak), Scientex Bandar Jasin (Malacca) and Scientex Pulau 3 (Johor), demonstrating strong market demand for affordable housing in these regions.

On a separate note, the group is on track to complete the installation of rooftop solar photovoltaic systems for its headquarters and 10 key packaging manufacturing plants nationwide by next month.

This initiative aims to reduce energy costs and lower Scope 2 emissions.

Lim said, "We see long-term opportunities in the flexible packaging industry, supported by our capacity and capabilities to innovate and develop customised value-added solutions. While the global packaging market remains subdued due to

ongoing supply chain disruptions and geopolitical tensions, the demand for flexible packaging persists, given its essential role in everyday activities.

"In our property division, we target the launch of 8,000 affordable homes annually starting in FY25, up from the 6,300 units in FY24. This aligns with our goal of delivering 50,000 affordable homes by 2028, with nearly 38,000 homes already completed."

Scientex shareholders yesterday approved a final dividend of 6 sen per share for the financial year ending July 31, 2024 (FY24). With the earlier interim dividend of 6 sen per share, the total dividend for FY24 amounts to 12 sen per share. This represents a total payout of RM186.5 million, equivalent to 34.2% of the group's FY24 net profit.



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# MICCI launches platform to 'unite' online businesses

BY AIMIE SHAZRIE  
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**KUALA LUMPUR:** The Malaysian International Chamber of Commerce and Industry (MICCI) has launched its E-Commerce Chapter, a step towards uniting industry stakeholders and bolstering the country's digital economy.

MICCI E-Commerce Chapter spokesperson Hafidzi Razali said the initiative is designed to foster collaboration among e-commerce companies, address common challenges and contribute to the sustainable growth of Malaysia's digital sector.

"Known as the E-Commerce Chapter, the platform brings together major industry players, including Shopee, Lazada, Carousell and Mudah.my, as its founding members. The chapter is open to all e-commerce companies operating in Malaysia, aiming to create a collaborative ecosystem that supports the industry's development," he said in a press conference at the launch yesterday.

Hafidzi said the chapter's primary purpose is to serve as a unified platform for dialogue, knowledge sharing, and advocacy on issues impacting the e-commerce sector.

"The chapter has been established to represent the collective voice of e-commerce businesses when engaging with stakeholders, policymakers, and regulators. Its objectives include addressing shared challenges, contributing to policy discussions, and ensuring that companies operating in the sector can play an active role in shaping Malaysia's digital economy. It will facilitate the exchange of best practices among industry players, enabling them to tackle common issues while advancing innovation."

Hafidzi emphasised the importance of aligning industry growth with consumer interests.

"Although the chapter primarily focuses on supporting businesses, consumers will benefit indirectly through improved services and the resolution of common issues in the sector. Companies will use the platform to discuss challenges such as delivery inefficiencies and policy constraints, with the aim of collectively

➤ E-Commerce Chapter will facilitate dialogue, knowledge sharing and advocacy on issues impacting the sector



Hanif (centre) during the official launch of the MICCI E-Commerce Chapter, in collaboration with Shopee, Lazada and Mudah.my. Also present are MICCI president Christina Tee (second from right), Lazada regional communications director Sharminé Ishak (left), Shopee Mobile head of government and public communications Nadia Anwar (second from left) and Mudah.my head of corporate affairs Chung Tsung Shen. —BERNAMAPIC

addressing them alongside government stakeholders," he said.

Hafidzi highlighted the rapid pace of technological advancements in e-commerce and the importance of aligning these innovations with regulatory frameworks. "By creating a space for dialogue between companies and policymakers, the chapter aims to avoid gaps that could hinder growth and to ensure that the industry evolves in tandem with global best practices," he said.

Domestic Trade and Cost of Living Ministry distributive trade and services industry director secretariat Muhamad Hanif Asa'ari drew attention to the importance of adapting Malaysia's regulatory frameworks to keep pace

with technological advancements in the e-commerce sector.

He disclosed that the ministry is reviewing key legislation to address emerging challenges and opportunities, including the Electronic Commerce Act 2006 and the Consumer Protection Act 1999. "The domestic and global e-commerce landscapes have evolved significantly since these laws were introduced."

Hanif pointed to the increasing number of consumer grievances related to online transactions as a critical area of focus.

"In the first quarter of 2024 alone, over 12,000 complaints were recorded ... the chapter will play a crucial role in shaping policies that address these issues."

## Carlo Rino shares open at 23.5 sen in ACE Market debut

**KUALA LUMPUR:** Carlo Rino Group Bhd aims to accelerate business expansion, enhance product offerings and upgrade capabilities to better serve customers and meet market demands through its initial public offering (IPO).

The fashion firm debuted on the ACE Market of Bursa Malaysia yesterday and its shares opened at 23.5 sen, 3.5 sen, or 13% lower than the IPO price of 27 sen, with 7.49 million shares changing hands.

In a statement yesterday, the fashion firm noted that with a total of RM46.4 million in gross proceeds from the IPO, 32.32% or RM15 million will be allocated to partly finance the construction and the fitting-out of a new flagship boutique and other facilities.

About 7.54% (RM 3.5 million) will be used to fund boutiques and department store counter refurbishment and 1.08% (RM500,000) for the maintenance of information technology (IT) infrastructure with the remaining proceeds will be utilised for working capital and listing-related expenses, it said.

Group managing director Datuk Seri Chiang Fong Yee said the company's transfer from the LEAP Market to the ACE Market marked a significant milestone in Carlo Rino's journey, which began in 1986.

"True to our philosophy, Carlo Rino has always been synonymous with youthful, boldness, vibrancy, and colour. Our brands continue to offer innovative, stylish, and functional products aligned with the latest fashion trends.

"With this in mind, we firmly believe this step will unlock new opportunities and elevate our brands to greater heights," he said.

The company stated that, based on its enlarged share capital of 977.51 million shares and an IPO price of 27 sen per share, its total market capitalisation is about RM263.93 million.

Carlo Rino is primarily involved in designing, promoting, marketing, distributing, and retailing women's handbags, footwear, and accessories.

TA Securities Holdings Bhd is the principal adviser, sponsor, sole underwriter, and placement agent for the IPO. —Bernama

## Northern Solar aims to raise RM42.4 million from IPO

**KUALA LUMPUR:** Solar renewable energy specialist Northern Solar Holdings Bhd aims to raise RM42.4 million through its initial public offering (IPO) in conjunction with its listing on the ACE Market of Bursa Malaysia.

The IPO involves the public issue of 67.3 million new shares and an offer for sale of 35.6 million existing shares at 63 sen per share, with the listing scheduled for Feb 6, 2025.

Speaking at the launch of Northern Solar's prospectus, managing director Lew Shooing Kai said that following the IPO, Northern Solar aims to expand its business by increasing the company's focus and coverage of Malaysia to include Penang, Perak, Kedah, Perlis and Sabah.

"Along with this, we set up a new corporate office with an engineering command centre to more efficiently streamline our operation."

"The command centre will of course be equipped with solar photovoltaic (PV) system monitoring and management equipment to provide real time monitoring of solar PV systems for customers," he said.

Lew said the company also intended to pursue a model of developing, owning and managing a portfolio of solar PV assets that sell the electricity generated to net energy metering and self-consumption consumers to generate a

stable inflow of revenue.

"For all these plans, we will be setting aside RM32.3 million, which is about 76% of the IPO proceeds," he said.

According to the prospectus, the company plans to use RM29.2 million or 68.8% of the proceeds raised from the IPO for working capital purposes to expand its PV systems business.

"A further RM3.2 million (7.4%) of the proceeds will be used to establish a new corporate office with an engineering command centre in Petaling Jaya as well as to fund the establishment of an expanded office in Johor and an additional office in Penang to strengthen its market presence in the southern and northern regions of Peninsular Malaysia.

"The remainder of the proceeds will be used to repay bank borrowings amounting to RM5.5 million (13%) and to defray the estimated listing expenses of RM4.6 million (10.8%)," it said.

Northern Solar said that based on its enlarged share capital of 395.6 million shares at a share price of RM0.63, the market capitalisation is projected to be RM249.2 million.

The IPO is open for subscription until Jan 20, 2025. M & A Securities Sdn Bhd is the adviser, sponsor, underwriter and placement agent for the IPO. —Bernama



Northern Solar intends to expand its business by increasing its focus and coverage in Malaysia post-IPO. —NORTHERN SOLAR PIC

BY JOHN GILBERT  
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**KUALA LUMPUR:** UK-based vaping company Airscream UK Ltd aims to make Malaysia a springboard to enhance its product reach across the Southeast Asian region.

The company sees Malaysia as a key location for its global operations due to the thriving vape market, which is said to be worth over RM3 billion and employs over 30,000 people.

Airscream Malaysia head of brand and marketing Andrew Koh said the rising demand for e-cigarettes directly aligns with the company's market strategy.

"We have seen increasing interest in our products across global markets, especially in regions where traditional cigarette use is declining such as Europe and Southeast Asia.

"Consumers are looking for quality options from credible vape brands due to the rise of illicit e-cigarettes that contain banned substances which are extremely harmful to one's health.

"As a globally compliant company that prides itself on the quality and standards of our products, this global trend supports our growth to offer better alternatives to combustible tobacco," he said in a media briefing.

He said the shift from traditional cigarettes to e-cigarettes is observed globally, with the decline in traditional cigarette use and the rise of e-cigarettes.

He said studies including those by the World Health Organisation (WHO), show that smokers in many countries are moving away from combustible tobacco products to e-cigarettes.

"This is motivated by those who are keen on quitting smoking and turn to vaping as an alternative. Vaping is more socially acceptable today because it does not produce ash or an off-putting smell," Koh said.

He said the switch from cigarettes to vaping as a less harmful alternative is the primary factor of industry growth.

A survey shows that from 2000 to 2022, the percentage of males who switched from cigarettes to vaping dropped from 68.9% to

# Airscream to use Malaysia as springboard to Southeast Asia

UK vaping firm sees rising interest in e-cigarettes, especially in regions where use of traditional items is decreasing

43.7%, while the percentage of females who switched dropped from 33.5% to 9.4%.

Based on findings published in the National Health and Morbidity Survey 2022: Adolescent Health Survey by the Institute for Public Health Malaysia reveals a concerning shift in smoking trends among the youth.

While traditional cigarette smoking has decreased from 13.8% in 2017 to 6.2% in 2022, e-cigarette use has surged from 9.8% to 14.9% over the same period.

When asked how the company ensure that non-smokers and underage people do not have access to its products, Koh said Airscream UK is committed to responsible marketing and retail practices.

"We have strict age-verification procedures at points of sale, both online and in stores. We work closely with partners and regulators to ensure that all sales comply with local laws, and we do not market or promote our products to non-smokers or minors.

"In addition, our minimalist packaging and mature marketing strategies are clearly aimed at



Vaping is more socially acceptable because it does not produce ash or an off-putting smell, says Koh.

adult users who are current smokers looking for alternatives," said Koh.

He said Airscream UK welcomes regulations that prioritise consumer safety and ensure product quality, and the company has always complied with local laws, and any additional regulatory measures in Malaysia have been and will continue to be incorporated into its business practices.

"Our goal is to provide high-quality, compliant products, and we are prepared to meet regulatory challenges.

"The regulation could also help protect the market from low-grade or subpar products while keeping a check on the illicit market if enforced strictly, fostering a more competitive environment for brands like ours.

"Additionally, it may help to deter minors or those who ought not to vape from accessing tobacco and vape products," Koh said.

Airscream Malaysia has a dedicated research and development lab and plans to ISO certify the lab by next year.

## Gradual tobacco tax strategy could cut smoking, combat illicit trade: UKM professor

BY AIMIE SHAZRIE  
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**PETALING JAYA:** A multiyear tax calendar, combined with stronger enforcement measures, could strike a better balance between curbing smoking and addressing the growing illicit tobacco trade.

University Kebangsaan Malaysia (UKM) public health medicine specialist Professor Dr Sharifa Ezzat Wan Puteh said the absence of a tobacco tax increase in Malaysia's 2025 Budget has sparked debate about missed opportunities in public health and economic sustainability.

She noted that Malaysia's stagnant tobacco tax rates, unchanged since 2018, leave a gap in the fight against smoking-related health costs and the illicit market.

"Malaysia spends RM6.1 billion annually on treating tobacco-related illnesses while generating only RM3 billion in tobacco tax revenue.

"The economic losses from the illicit tobacco trade are equally alarming, amounting to approximately RM5.1 billion annually," Sharifa said in an exclusive interview with SunBiz.

She emphasised that higher taxes are a proven deterrent to smoking but warned that without combating illegal trade, higher taxes could inadvertently boost the illicit market.

Sharifa highlighted that a multiyear tobacco tax calendar, which involves gradual tax increases over several years, could help reduce smoking rates while mitigating negative economic impacts.

"This approach would allow businesses and consumers to adjust to rising costs, avoiding sharp price hikes that drive consumers toward

untaxed and unregulated products.

"A gradual tax increase for tobacco is good as long as the illicit market can be stamped out. Failure to do so would actually have the reverse effect," she said.

She noted that a gradual tax plan must be accompanied by robust enforcement measures, such as improved border controls and harsher penalties for smugglers to maximise effectiveness.

"These steps are critical to reducing the availability of illicit tobacco products, which undermine legitimate businesses and public health efforts," added Sharifa.

She recommended that Sweden's success in reducing smoking rates to under 5% provides a valuable roadmap. The country implemented gradual tax hikes alongside public health campaigns, cessation programs, and regulated alternatives like Snus.

"This comprehensive approach not only decreased smoking prevalence but also led to lower rates of cardiovascular disease and lung cancer.

"In Sweden, nicotine use continues through alternatives like Snus, yet they have achieved some of the lowest rates of tobacco-related diseases," she noted, adding that Malaysia could adopt similar strategies, combining predictable tax increases with education and smoking cessation support.

Beyond taxation, Sharifa remarked that Malaysia's tobacco control strategy must integrate public education, cessation programs, and enforcement against illegal sales.

"Smoking bans in public spaces, while beneficial, do not address the root causes of smoking or the allure of the black market.

"A multiyear tobacco tax calendar could



Sharifa emphasised that higher taxes are a proven deterrent to smoking.

serve as the cornerstone of a broader strategy," she said.

She noted that by gradually increasing taxes and strengthening enforcement, the government can reduce tobacco consumption, minimise the economic burden of smoking-related diseases, and combat the illicit market effectively.

"This sustainable, balanced approach could deliver both economic and public health gains while supporting businesses and preventing a backlash from consumers," added Sharifa.

## RHB IB remains upbeat on Coastal Contracts, maintains 'buy' call

**KUALA LUMPUR:** RHB Investment Bank Bhd (RHB IB) is upbeat on Coastal Contracts Bhd (COCO), given the near completion of its Joint Venture (JV) loan refinancing, with payment expected in the fourth quarter of 2024 (Q4'24), positioning the company well to support new projects.

In a research note, RHB IB highlighted that the group is set to receive a payment of US\$155 million in Q4'24 and an additional US\$10 million in the Q1'25 from its JV, potentially closing the year with nearly RM1 billion in net cash.

"This robust cash position could pave the way for a special dividend, particularly ahead of the impending tax on dividends.

"Moreover, it strengthens COCO's capacity to pursue new opportunities, including renewable energy projects such as large-scale solar farms, with the group actively bidding for projects in Sabah," the bank noted.

However, RHB IB pointed out some challenges, including slower-than-expected progress in the contract extension negotiations for the Jack-Up Gas Compression Service Unit (JUGCSU), which may be delayed beyond the initial year-end timeline.

"As such, we have adjusted our earnings forecast for FY25-26 downward by 9.3% and 4.4%, reflecting lower contributions from the JUGCSU," RHB IB added.

Despite these challenges, RHB IB reiterated its "buy" recommendation for COCO and revised its target price to RM1.67, offering a 13% upside from the current market price of RM1.48. - Bernama



## Thai central bank keeps key rate steady at 2.25%

**BANGKOK:** Thailand's central bank left its key interest rate unchanged yesterday as widely expected, but said global factors would need to be monitored closely in setting monetary policy with heightened uncertainty ahead.

The Bank of Thailand's monetary policy committee voted unanimously to keep the one-day repurchase rate at 2.25% at its final meeting of 2024, after delivering a surprise cut at its previous policy meeting in October.

All but two of 30 economists in a Reuters poll had predicted the key rate would be held steady this week.

The two outliers had expected a 25 basis-point cut. The median forecast in the poll was that rates would be cut by 25 basis points by mid-2025.

The central bank said the decision was consistent with the economic trajectory and preserved policy space amid increasing uncertainties about the policies of major economies.

"The committee recognises the heightened uncertainty going forward and deems it necessary to monitor economic growth and inflation outlook in deliberating monetary policy going forward," it said in a statement.

The central bank yesterday maintained its 2024 economic growth forecast at 2.7%, and kept its prediction for 2.9% growth in 2025.

Miguel Chanco, chief emerging Asia economist at Pantheon Macroeconomics, said the next rate cut would likely come in the second quarter of next year.

"We expect the central bank to remain on hold for a few more meetings, before enacting a second – and final – 25 basis points rate cut in the second quarter, most likely at the June sit-down."

Southeast Asia's second-largest economy has lagged its regional peers in recent years, saddled by high household debt and borrowing costs, and weak exports.

Last year's growth was 1.9%. The central bank maintained its projections for foreign tourist arrivals at 36 million this year and 39.5 million in 2025.

Finance Minister Pichai Chunhavanjira had on Monday said he wanted a further rate cut, reiterating his call for policy easing to support the economy.

Bank of Thailand Governor Sethaput Suthiwartnarueput said earlier this month a mix of policies was needed to manage the economy as interest rates alone cannot address everything. – Reuters

# Honda and Nissan in preliminary merger talks

➤ Major automakers reeling from tough competition in electric vehicle sector

**TOKYO:** Japanese auto giants Honda and Nissan are in preliminary merger talks to help them compete against Tesla and Chinese electric vehicle makers, media reports said yesterday.

Separately, Bloomberg reported that Taiwanese tech giant Foxconn – officially known as Hon Hai Precision Industry – has approached Nissan to take a controlling stake.

Shares in Nissan soared as much as 24%, while Honda dipped more than 2%.

Mitsubishi Motors – of which Nissan is the top shareholder – gained 13%.

Japan's number two and three automakers behind Toyota had already agreed in March to explore a strategic partnership on EVs.

"We are discussing possibilities for cooperation ... in a wide range of fields and in various areas, and those possibilities include the latest reports, but there is nothing decided," a Honda spokesman said.

Nissan said: "The content of the report is not something that has been announced by either company. If there are any updates, we will inform our stakeholders at the appropriate time."

Major automakers the world over have been reeling from tough competition in EVs, in particular from China competitors such as BYD.

Volkswagen, for instance, is considering closing German factories for the first time in its history.

Last month, Nissan announced 9,000 job cuts, slashed its sales forecasts and said it would reduce global production capacity by 20%.

Warning of a "severe situation", CEO Makoto Uchida said he would forfeit half his salary.

Nissan has seen a turbulent decade that included an attempted major alliance with France's Renault that saw its former boss Carlos Ghosn arrested in 2018.

Honda and Nissan are considering operating under a holding company and will soon sign a memorandum of understanding,

the *Nikkei* newspaper reported.

Their respective stakes, as well as other details, will be decided later, and they also look to eventually bring Mitsubishi Motors under the holding company, the paper said.

The *Financial Times* reported that the exploratory talks about a merger were at an early stage.

There are, however, concerns about a possible political backlash since a merger could result in significant job cuts, it reported.

Honda is considering several options including a merger, capital tie-up or the establishment of a holding company, said executive vice-president Shinji Aoyama.

China overtook Japan as the world's biggest vehicle exporter in 2023, helped by its dominance in

EVs, a sector where Japanese firms have lost ground by focusing on hybrid vehicles.

Honda announced plans in May to double investment in electric vehicles to US\$65 billion (RM290 billion) by 2030, part of its ambitious target set three years ago of achieving 100% EV sales by 2040.

Nissan has signalled similar ambitions.

It said 16 of the 30 new models it plans to launch over the next three years would be "electrified".

The world's auto giants are increasingly prioritising electric and hybrid vehicles, with demand growing for less polluting models as concern about climate change grows.

At the same time, however, there has been a slowdown in the EV market on the back of consumer concern about high prices, reliability, range and a lack of charging points.

Hybrids that combine battery power and internal combustion

engines have proved enduringly popular in Japan, accounting for 40% of sales in 2022.

Just 1.7% of cars sold in Japan in 2022 were electric – compared with 15% in western Europe and 5.3% in the United States.

"From Nissan's perspective, the possible merger would provide short-term relief for Nissan, which is under significant financial pressure," Bloomberg Intelligence analyst Tatsuo Yoshida told AFP.

"From Honda's perspective, Honda is performing better financially, the benefits for Honda would be more long-term."

Seiji Sugiura, auto analyst at Tokai Tokyo Intelligence Laboratory, said that a merger would create a "strong competitor" to Toyota, helping them in China.

"If Japanese carmakers compete with each other more, that will be good for them in competing with foreign competitors including Chinese carmakers and Tesla" – AFP



An employee arranging gold jewellery for display at a store in Amritsar. – AFP/PIIC

## Kioxia shares jump 10% on Tokyo debut

**TOKYO:** Shares in Japanese chipmaker Kioxia closed 10% higher in Tokyo yesterday after an initial public offering that valued the firm at at ¥784 billion (RM23 billion).

Formerly the semiconductor unit of Japanese engineering giant Toshiba, the firm is the world's third-largest producer of NAND flash memory chips.

It was acquired by US investment firm Bain Capital in 2018.

Memory chips are used in everyday devices such as smartphones and storage drives, as well as in industrial and medical equipment, but their prices are notoriously volatile.

Global demand for the chips has been driven by the growth of generative artificial intelligence technology, such as that used in OpenAI's popular chatbot ChatGPT.

Kioxia had been expected to go public in October, emboldened by soaring demand for AI, but a rout in tech shares forced the company to delay until this month.

The firm set its listing price at ¥1,455 per share, valuing it at ¥784 billion and raising about ¥120 billion – making it Japan's second biggest IPO this year.

Its shares closed 10% higher at ¥1,601. – AFP

## India's trade deficit widens as gold imports surge

**NEW DELHI:** India's merchandise trade deficit widened last month to a record level, led by a surge in gold imports, while exports fell due to weaker global demand.

The merchandise trade deficit in November stood at US\$37.84 billion (RM169 billion), data released by the Commerce Ministry showed, much higher than economists' forecast of US\$23.9 billion, according to a Reuters poll.

The deficit stood at US\$27.14 billion in October.

The bigger trade gap will widen India's current account deficit and add to the pressure on the rupee, which closed at a record low on Tuesday.

India's merchandise exports in November fell 4.9% year-on-year to US\$32.11 billion, while imports surged by over 27% to US\$69.95 billion, data showed.

Inbound shipments of gold climbed to a record high of US\$14.8 billion last month, more than doubling from US\$7.13 billion in October, data showed, as the fall in global gold prices in November prompted many importers to ramp up inventories to meet rising demand.

"Gold imports have been a major culprit in the overshoot of trade deficit, having seen nearly 50% increase year-to-date vs last year," said Emkay Global Financial

Services economist Madhavi Arora.

Both the consumption and investment demand for gold have increased, while the global price of gold has also risen materially this year versus 2023, Arora said.

Trade Ministry officials said a cut in the import tariff from 15% to 6% in July earlier this year, festival and wedding demand, coupled with higher returns on gold investments are behind the increase in demand.

In total, merchandise and services exports were estimated at US\$67.79 billion in November, and imports at US\$87.63 billion, against US\$73.21 billion exports and US\$83.33 billion imports, respectively, in the month before. – Reuters



## Tariffs 'problematic' for America too: Canadian official

**PARIS:** The tariffs that Donald Trump has threatened to impose on Canada would also cause problems to US states if he enacts them, the head of the Canadian foreign investment promotion agency told AFP.

"I think from a business perspective, no one will benefit from a tariff regime," Laurel Broten, chief executive of Invest in Canada, said in an interview during a visit to Paris.

Trump, who takes office in January, has threatened to slap 25% tariffs on imports from Canada and Mexico, accusing both of allowing the United States to be flooded with illicit drugs and undocumented migrants.

In response, Canada's largest province, Ontario, said it would be prepared to cut off energy exports to the United States if Trump makes good on this threat.

"The establishment of tariffs would not only be problematic for Canada, it would be problematic for many US states," Broten said.

"I think the government of Canada and the US government will need to work through this."

She said the economies of the neighbouring countries are closely intertwined, notably in the energy and auto sectors.

Broten gave the example of car parts that cross the border "six or seven times" for the production of a vehicle.

"A piece comes from here, it gets attached to something here, it comes back across."

"So that's the level of integration of the economy."

"There's no car manufacturer in North America that wants to see seven tariffs on their vehicle parts as they cross the border."

Canadian Prime Minister Justin Trudeau, who flew to Trump's Florida estate, Mar-a-Lago, in November to discuss the issue, said last week that the proposed tariffs would be "devastating" for his country.

Broten said the US and Canadian governments had "a good working relationship" during the first Trump term in 2017-2021, recalling that a free trade agreement had been renegotiated at the time.

"I know the government is committed to engaging directly on this, so that businesses on both sides of the border continue to succeed," she said.

"I think the government is being thoughtful about it and making sure that we also don't overreact."

"President Trump isn't even in office yet."

"And so we need to be calm." – AFP

## Phillips 66 to sell stake in Texas pipeline for US\$865 million

**HOUSTON:** Phillips 66 said it would sell its 25% stake in the Gulf Coast Express pipeline in Texas to an affiliate of ArcLight Capital Partners for US\$865 million (RM3.8 billion), setting the US refiner on course to exceed its asset sale target.

Despite a fall in refining profits, Phillips 66 has opted to maintain

stable investor payouts by cutting down on costs and setting a divestiture target of US\$3 billion through non-core asset sales.

The company had already sold fuel terminals, pipelines and a stake in a Switzerland retail joint venture to raise US\$2.7 billion before the latest announcement.

"We intend to continue to optimise the portfolio and rationalise non-core assets going forward," said Phillips 66 CEO Mark Lashier.

It also forecast a reduction in refining segment expenditure to US\$822 million in 2025, compared with the US\$1.07 billion it expects to spend for the unit in 2024.

US refining margins are expected to stabilise next year, according to Energy Information Administration data, backed by an uptick in industrial demand and refinery closures.

The company expects its overall expenditure to be US\$2.1 billion next year, compared with the US\$2.2 billion it had projected for 2024. – Reuters

# Trump transition team plans to cut off support for EVs

➤ Proposals include duties on battery materials, rollback of emissions standards

**WASHINGTON:** Incoming US President Donald Trump's transition team is recommending sweeping changes to cut off support for electric vehicles and charging stations and to strengthen measures blocking cars, components and battery materials from China, according to a document seen by Reuters.

The recommendations, which have not been previously reported, come as the US electric vehicle transition stalls and China's heavily subsidised EV industry continues to surge, in part because of its superior battery supply chain.

On the campaign trail, Trump vowed to ease regulations on fossil fuel cars and roll back what he called President Joe Biden's EV mandate.

The transition team also recommends imposing tariffs on

battery materials globally, a bid to boost US production, and then negotiating individual exemptions with allies, the document shows.

The recommendations are a stark departure from the policies of the Biden administration, which sought to balance encouraging a domestic battery supply chain, separate from China, with a rapid EV transition.

The transition team plan would redirect money now flowing to building charging stations and making EVs affordable into national defence priorities, including securing

China-free supplies of batteries and the critical minerals to build them.

The proposals came from a Trump transition team charged with crafting a strategy for swift implementation of new automotive policies.

The team also calls for eliminating the Biden administration's US\$7,500 (RM33,500) tax credit for consumer EV purchases, a plan that Reuters first reported last month.

The policies could strike a blow to US EV sales and production at a time when many legacy automakers, including General

Motors and Hyundai, have recently introduced a wider array of electric offerings to the US market.

Cutting government EV support could also hurt sales of Elon Musk's Tesla, the dominant US EV seller.

But Musk, who spent over US\$250 million helping to elect Trump, has said losing subsidies would hurt rivals more than Tesla.

The transition team calls for clawing back whatever funds remain from Biden's US\$7.5 billion plan to build charging stations and shifting the money to battery-minerals processing and the "national defence supply chain and critical infrastructure."

While batteries, minerals and other EV components are "critical to defence production," electric vehicles "and charging stations are not," the document says.

The Defence Department in recent years has highlighted US strategic vulnerabilities because of China's dominance of the mining and refining of critical minerals, including graphite and lithium needed for batteries, and rare-earth metals used in both EV motors and military aircraft.

A 2021 government report said the US military faces "escalating power requirements" for weapons and communication equipment, among other technologies.

"Assured sources of critical minerals and materials" are "critical to US national security," it said.

Trump transition spokesman Karoline Leavitt said voters gave Trump a mandate to deliver on campaign promises, including stopping government attacks on gas-powered cars.

"When he takes office, President Trump will support the auto industry, allowing space for both gas-powered cars and electric vehicles." – Reuters



EVgo fast electric vehicle chargers are shown charging a Chevy Bolt in the US city of Encinitas. – REUTERS/SPIC

## Honeywell considers spinning off aerospace business

**NEW YORK:** Honeywell said it was considering a plan to separate its high-margin aerospace business, a move backed by activist investor Elliott Investment Management, which has been pushing for the company's breakup.

The company, one of the last surviving US conglomerates, has been on a deal-making spree this year under CEO Vimal Kapur, as it focuses on automation, aviation and energy businesses, while shedding segments that do not align with its plans.

Its shares have, however, underperformed this year, attracting the attention of Elliott, which has taken a more than US\$5 billion (RM22 billion) stake in the company and pushed for the separation of its aerospace and automation business.

Honeywell said its board had made "significant progress" on its review of strategic alternatives to date and the company would provide an update with its fourth-quarter results.

Elliott responded by welcoming the company's announcement.

"We believe the portfolio transformation Vimal and his team are leading represents the right course for Honeywell, and we look forward to the upcoming completion of the review and to supporting Honeywell as it implements the necessary steps to realize its full value," the activist investor said.

A standalone aerospace business, which is Honeywell's biggest unit and counts Boeing and Airbus as its customers, could be valued between US\$90 billion and US\$120 billion including debt, analysts said.

The aerospace unit, which builds everything from engines to cockpit components, has benefited from rising jet production in the last few years, though supply chain disruptions have hurt the company's ability to meet some of that demand.

For the first nine months of 2024, Honeywell's aerospace business reported revenue of US\$11.47 billion, accounting for about 40% of the firm's total sales for the period.

The jetmaking boom is set to continue in the coming years amid record backlogs at planemakers,

while a shortage of planes is set to boost demand for repairs.

"We do think that today's announcement suggests a faster timeline for a potential break-up than we had anticipated, and we continue to think a more streamlined portfolio/focused management could unlock incremental value over time," Citi analyst Andrew Kaplowitz said.

Honeywell had disclosed last month that it would sell its personal protective equipment business to Protective Industrial Products for US\$1.33 billion in cash. – Reuters

## Novo Nordisk invests in new factory in Denmark

**COPENHAGEN:** Danish pharmaceutical giant Novo Nordisk, maker of diabetes and weight-loss treatments Ozempic and Wegovy, said it was investing 8.5 billion kroner (RM5.7 billion) to build a new factory in Denmark to produce drugs against rare diseases.

The 40,000 square metre production facility and warehouse in Odense "marks the first time in this century that Novo Nordisk breaks ground in Denmark by establishing a new production site," the company said in a statement.

"Designed to be modular and flexible, it will accommodate multiple product types within rare disease, such as haemophilia, both now and in the future."

Henrik Wulff, executive vice-president at Novo Nordisk, said the facility would help the company "meet the growing global demand for our life-changing medicines".

In November, the drugmaker posted a 21% rise in net profit to 27.3 billion kroner for the July-to-September period, but lamented capacity limitations at its production sites.

Novo Nordisk said construction work on the Odense site had commenced and it is scheduled to be completed in 2027.

It is expected to create 400 jobs once completed.

Sales of Wegovy, which has been approved for use to treat obesity in Britain, Denmark, France, Germany, Norway and the US, rose by 42% in the first nine months of the year, according to Novo Nordisk.

Sales of the company's other semaglutide bestseller, Ozempic – an injectable anti-diabetic treatment which has become popular for its slimming properties – soared by 54% in the same period.

Novo Nordisk has a hold on 74% of the market for weight-loss treatments.

The World Obesity Federation predicts over half of the world's population will be overweight or obese by 2035 and the global economic impact could then exceed US\$4 trillion (RM17 trillion) a year. – AFP

## Barrick Gold threatens to suspend Mali operations

**BAMAKO:** Barrick Gold will suspend operations in Mali if gold shipments continue to be blocked, the company said as it struggles to reach agreement with authorities on a new mining code in the West African country.

Conditions at the miner's Loulo-Gounkoto complex have "deteriorated significantly", Barrick said, adding employees have been imprisoned without cause and shipments of bullion have been blocked.

"If shipments remain suspended, Barrick will be compelled to suspend operations, further impacting the viability of this critical economic driver for Mali."

The world's second-largest gold miner by volume has been negotiating with authorities in Mali for a new mining code to govern its operations in the country for about a year.

Barrick said those talks have been "unsuccessful".

Negotiations stalled even after Barrick made "significant concessions", which the government rejected, Barrick said.

A senior official at the Ministry of Mines told Reuters "negotiations are continuing, they're ongoing".

Mali authorities have arrested staff from Australia's Resolute Mining, including its CEO Terence Holohan, who were released after the company agreed to pay US\$160 million to resolve a tax dispute.

Executives from Barrick have also been detained and the government has an arrest warrant for its CEO Mark Bristow. – Reuters

# Britain seeks to repair relations with China

► Govt opts for less critical approach in hopes of economic benefits

**LONDON:** Britain's Labour government has pared back an audit of relations with China, four sources with knowledge of the matter said, preparing the way for a less critical report that could help Prime Minister Keir Starmer focus on improving economic ties.

The Labour Party said before taking power the audit would be Britain's first in-depth, potentially year-long appraisal of relations and supply chains with a country considered by the security services as the nation's biggest long-term threat.

The government is now opting for a quicker and less in-depth approach, which will most probably end up being less critical of China, the sources said.

Two of the sources pointed to Starmer's growth agenda and plan to improve relations with an important trading partner for the decision.

Asked about Reuters findings, a British government spokesman said "the audit process is ongoing".

"We are carrying out a full and

comprehensive audit on the breadth of the UK's relationship with China which will bring a consistent, long-term and strategic approach to managing the UK's relations with China."

The Chinese embassy in London declined to comment.

Ministers want to ensure that the audit, which began in October, will be finished before the inauguration of the US president next month, but the timeframe might slip, three of the sources said.

Donald Trump's return to the White House could put Britain under pressure to take a tougher approach to China.

Trump's nomination of Marco Rubio for secretary of state has signalled his approach towards Beijing could go beyond tariffs and trade to a more hawkish stance on China as the United States' main strategic rival.

Labour had originally planned for the audit to create a clear, consistent position for government, businesses and universities on how they should deal with the security challenges posed by China, the sources said.

The review was the only mention of relations with Beijing in Labour's manifesto before the election that brought the party to power in July.

But unlike a British government strategic defence review being carried out by a host of experts and led by former Nato secretary

general George Robertson, the launch of the China audit, which began in October, was never formally announced.

Labour officials had said in opposition they wanted the audit to help limit goods entering Britain's supply chain from China's far western Xinjiang region, where human rights groups have documented alleged abuses against the Uyghur population.

China denies the accusation.

But Labour has since backed away from its position in opposition to push for international recognition of China's treatment of the Uyghurs as genocide, the sources said.

Labour had also intended to model the audit on a German review last year, which took a year-and-a-half to complete and involved government officials, MPs, businesses, academics and non-government organisations.

Instead, the British audit will now mainly rely on the expertise of government officials, two of the sources said.

It is being carried out by the Foreign Office, and some of the main findings will be published.

Reuters was not able to establish who had ordered the government to adopt the scaled back approach.

The published review was likely to largely repeat the government's "three Cs" strategy towards China – challenge, compete and cooperate, the sources said.

Labour wants to improve ties with China after the previous Conservative government restricted Chinese investment and expressed concern at Beijing's increasing assertiveness.

Several Conservative lawmakers have warned about the security threat posed by China, an issue that was underscored when a Chinese businessman was banned from Britain on national security grounds because he was suspected of being a spy.

The businessman was a close associate of Prince Andrew, King Charles' younger brother.

Starmer is hoping an improvement in relations could yield economic benefits and drive the growth he has staked his tenure on.

Last month, Starmer became the first British leader to meet Chinese President Xi Jinping since 2018, when they held talks at the G20 summit in Brazil.

A day later, Starmer declined to publicly condemn the sentencing of 45 pro-democracy activists in Hong Kong to prison, when asked at a press conference.

Britain's Finance Ministry is also working on reviving high-level meetings with China that last took place in 2019, with Chancellor of the Exchequer Rachel Reeves considering travelling to Beijing next year. – Reuters



Starmer addressing military personnel onboard battleship HMS Iron Duke in Tallinn, Estonia, on the sidelines of the Joint Expeditionary Force Leader's Summit. – AFP/IC

## ECB to continue cutting interest rates

**FRANKFURT:** European Central Bank (ECB) chief Christine Lagarde said eurozone policymakers would keep cutting interest rates and warned that higher US tariffs under President-elect Donald Trump could hit growth in the bloc.

"Even though we are not there yet, we are close to achieving our target" of 2% inflation, Lagarde said in a speech at the Bank of Lithuania.

"If the incoming data continue to confirm our baseline, the direction of travel is clear and we expect to lower interest rates further."

The ECB cut rates again last week as inflation looked to be coming under control and the eurozone economy showed signs of weakness.

The quarter-point move was the Frankfurt-based central bank's third cut in a row and its fourth since June.

The easing cycle has brought the ECB's key

deposit rate down to 3% from an all-time high of four percent.

The central bank's stance remained "restrictive", Lagarde said, meaning it would act as a brake on business activity in the eurozone – the ECB's main lever for tamping inflation.

But "with the disinflation process well on track, and downside risks to growth", the ECB could loosen its monetary policy and soften its messaging, Lagarde said.

Inflation in the eurozone stood at 2.3% in November, having hit highs of over 10% in late 2022.

And in new economic projections published last week, the ECB said it expected the inflation rate to decline to 2.1% in 2025 and 1.9% in 2026.

There was now a greater risk that inflation would fall even further due to a "weaker-than-

expected growth outlook" and "geopolitical events", Lagarde said.

If the United States took a protectionist run on trade under Trump, "growth in the euro area is likely to take a hit", she said.

On the campaign trail, Trump threatened blanket tariffs of at least 10% on all imports when he returns to the Oval Office.

Even if the European market was not targeted directly, eurozone manufacturers were "particularly sensitive to shifts in confidence about world trade", Lagarde said.

At the same time, "a rise in geopolitical tensions could push energy prices and freight costs higher in the near term".

The ECB's governing council will hold its first rate-setting meeting of 2025 on Jan 30, 10 days after Trump's inauguration. – AFP



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# MARKET ROUND-UP: DECEMBER 18

**BURSA MALAYSIA**

## Trade Statistic 18 Dec 2024



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

Sources: Bursa Malaysia, Bernama, [shareinvestor.com](http://shareinvestor.com) and websites

**DISCLAIMER:** The data and reports are provided as a service to investors. Sun Media Corporation Sdn Bhd shall not be liable or responsible for any consequences resulting from usage of the information.

Bursa Indices		
INDEX		CHANGE
FBMEMAS	12,280.70	+18.76
FBMKLCI	1,599.58	+2.25
CONSUMER PRODUCTS	542.98	+0.47
INDUSTRIAL PRODUCTS	172.49	+0.35
CONSTRUCTION	303.59	+0.47
FINANCIAL SERVICES	18,896.10	-39.82
ENERGY	815.31	-1.35
TELECOMMUNICATIONS	538.11	-3.09
HEALTH CARE	2,359.79	+60.09
TRANSPORTATION	1,038.33	+2.19
PROPERTY	1,084.43	-1.93
PLANTATION	7,632.76	+4.67
FBMSHA	12,322.40	+39.35
FBMACE	5,246.44	+4.58
TECHNOLOGY	63.84	-0.28
<b>TURNOVER: 2.548 bil</b>		<b>VALUE: RM2.285 bil</b>

## Bursa rebounds on support for selected heavyweights

BURSA Malaysia rebounded and closed higher yesterday due to buying support in selected heavyweights amid mixed performances from Asian markets.

At 5pm, the FBM KLCI rose 0.14% or 2.25 points to 1,599.58 from Tuesday's close of 1,597.33.

The index opened unchanged and moved between 1,594.75 and 1,602.38 throughout the trading session.

In the broader market, decliners marginally beat gainers 501 to 480, while 562 counters were unchanged, 928 untraded and 10 suspended.

Turnover narrowed to 2.55 billion units valued at RM2.29 billion versus 2.99 billion units worth RM2.43 billion on Tuesday.

SPI Asset Management managing director Stephen Innes said despite the overall narrative being one of cautious anticipation, the mood on the trading floors was tense as investors brace for the US Federal Reserve's (Fed) Federal Open Market Committee (FOMC) meeting.

Among heavyweight counters, Tenaga Nasional was 28 sen higher at RM14.08, Nestle increased RM1.20 to RM99.00, IHH Healthcare, Petronas Chemicals and Maxis added 3 sen to RM7.13, RM4.81 and RM3.60 respectively, and YTL Corporation rose 2 sen to RM2.14.

Of the most active stocks, ACE Market debutant Carlo Rino Group was 4 sen lower at 23 sen, Supermax was 12 sen higher to RM1.22, Top Glove perked up 7 sen to RM1.38, MYEG lost half-a-sen to 94.5 sen and Talam Transform was flat at 2.5 sen.

On the index board, the FBM Emas Shariah Index climbed 39.35 points to 12,322.49, the FBM Emas Index rose 18.76 points to 12,280.79 and the FBMT 100 Index gained 19.43 points to 11,965.42. - Bernama

Top 20 Actives				
STOCKS	CLOSING (RM)	+/- (RM)	+/- (%)	VOLUME ('00)
CARLORINO	0.230	-0.040	-14.81	1,393,789
HSI-PWB1	0.165	-0.015	-8.33	830,713
HSI-CWAM	0.085	+0.005	+6.25	812,539
SUPERMX	1.220	+0.120	+10.91	755,624
HSI-CWAO	0.055	-	-	616,262
TOPGLOV	1.380	+0.070	+5.34	505,031
MYEG	0.945	-0.005	-0.53	391,180
HSI-CY8	0.080	+0.010	+14.29	332,325
TALAMT	0.025	-	-	313,436
BERTAM-WA	0.025	-	-	190,679
YNHPROP	0.580	+0.035	+6.42	189,818
TANCO	1.810	+0.110	+6.47	189,416
CAPITALA	0.960	-0.020	-2.04	189,280
MYEG-CGW	0.005	-0.005	-50.00	176,800
JTRGROUP	0.465	+0.060	+14.81	173,142
GOCEAN	0.175	-	-	172,909
ARMADA	0.660	-0.005	-0.75	170,196
PESTECH	0.185	+0.015	+8.82	170,123
YBS	0.795	+0.040	+5.30	165,696
HSI-CYX	0.145	+0.010	+7.41	157,970



Top 20 Gainers (By RM)			
STOCKS	CLOSING (RM)	+/- (RM)	VOLUME ('00)
NESTLE	99.000	+1.200	1,025
UTDPLT	33.300	+0.900	6,358
TENAGA	14.080	+0.280	99,436
CARLSBG	20.640	+0.200	457
HARTA	4.030	+0.200	120,961
MCEMENT	4.960	+0.140	4,833
HSI-PWBN	2.040	+0.130	20
HLFG	18.060	+0.120	1,485
SUPERMX	1.220	+0.120	755,624
TANCO-WC	1.490	+0.120	80,823
RAPID	1.070	+0.115	84,598
TANCO	1.810	+0.110	189,416
F&N	27.640	+0.100	456
SHH	1.450	+0.100	2,302
UMCCA	5.200	+0.100	589
UWC	2.930	+0.100	24,954
BIPORT	6.100	+0.090	11
TMK	1.900	+0.090	45,126
CHINAETF-MYR	4.740	+0.040	33
PETRONM	4.190	+0.080	386

Top 20 Gainers (By %)			
STOCKS	CLOSING (RM)	+/- (%)	VOLUME ('00)
ARTRONIQ-WA	0.030	+100.00	94,630
BORNOIL	0.010	+100.00	18,205
FBMKLCI-CQH	0.010	+100.00	210
KANGER-WB	0.010	+100.00	2
KGROU	0.010	+100.00	13,167
TXCD-PA	0.030	+100.00	2,328
SUPERMX-C4E	0.135	+68.75	88,356
MUDAJA-WB	0.055	+57.14	33,234
GIU-WA	0.015	+50.00	3,860
HARTA-C2F	0.015	+50.00	25,068
LIANKUN-WB	0.015	+50.00	77
LCTITAN-CS	0.015	+50.00	1
TENAGA-C2N	0.015	+50.00	59,042
HARTA-C2H	0.140	+47.37	5,050
SUPERMX-C4H	0.130	+44.44	2,760
SUPERMX-C4F	0.125	+38.89	2,722
SUPERMX-C4J	0.090	+38.46	12,196
SUPERMX-C4N	0.255	+37.84	41,260
EIB-WA	0.040	+33.33	8
HANDAL-WB	0.020	+33.33	599

World Stocks/Commodities			
INDEX	CLOSING	DAILY CHANGE	DAILY CHANGE (%)
DJIA (US)	43,449.90	-267.58	-0.61
S&P 500 (US)	6,050.61	-23.47	-0.39
NASDAQ (US)	20,109.06	-64.83	-0.32
NYSE (US)	19,517.61	-110.07	-0.56
EURO STOXX 50 (EUR)	4,953.73	11.15	0.23
FTSE 100 (UK)	8,222.69	27.49	0.34
DAX (GER)	20,277.46	31.09	0.15
NIKKEI 225 (JPN)	39,081.71	-282.97	-0.72
TOPIX INDEX (JPN)	2,484.43	-8.33	-0.31
HANG SENG INDEX (HK)	19,864.55	164.07	0.83
CSI 300 (CHN)	3,941.89	19.86	0.51
MSCI ASIA PACIFIC	183.98	-0.74	-0.4
SHANGHAI SE COM (CHN)	3,382.21	20.72	0.62
KOSPI INDEX (SK)	2,484.43	27.62	1.12
SENSEX INDEX (IND)	80,127.63	-556.82	-0.69
ASX 200 (AUS)	8,309.37	-4.63	-0.06
ALL ORDINARIES INDX (AUS)	8,558.60	-0.01	0
FBM KLCI	1,599.58	2.25	0.14
STRAITS TIMES INDEX (S'PORE)	3,785.20	-14.73	-0.39
WTI (US\$/BBL.)	70.7	0.62	0.88
BRENT (US\$/BBL.)	73.75	0.56	0.77
GOLD (COMEX) (US\$/T OZ)	2,663.70	1.7	0.06
SILVER (COMEX) (US\$/T OZ)	30.86	-0.07	-0.21
PLATINUM (US\$/T OZ)	935.58	-5.81	-0.62
COPPER (COMEX) (US CENTS/LB.)	414.5	-0.15	-0.04
COPPER 3MO (LME) (US\$/MT)	8,989.50	-73	-0.81
CORN (US CENTS/BU.)	443.5	0	0
WHEAT (US CENTS/BU.)	544.5	-0.5	-0.09
SOYBEAN OIL (CBOT) (US CENTS/LB.)	39.98	-0.97	-2.37
COCOA (ICE) (US\$/MT)	11,765.00	-56	-0.47
RUBBER (S'PORE) (US CENTS/KG)	197.7	-4.7	-2.32

As at 5pm, Dec 18

Top 20 Losers (By RM)			
STOCKS	CLOSING (RM)	+/- (RM)	VOLUME ('00)
APOLLO	6.570	-0.440	697
PETDAG	20.240	-0.300	586
PGF-PA	1.300	-0.300	23
AYER	7.200	-0.270	1
KOTRA	4.400	-0.180	270
KLK	21.440	-0.160	4,889
MPI	26.280	-0.120	1,029
PANAMY	17.780	-0.120	139
AEONCR	6.090	-0.100	7,785
HM	0.125	-0.100	47,465
PPB	12.120	-0.100	6,747
CIHLDG	2.500	-0.090	428
CEPCO	1.100	-0.090	330
JTASA-C4	0.060	-0.090	100
MBMR	6.200	-0.090	3,186
METROD	1.260	-0.090	2
CYBERE	0.720	-0.085	1,965
FRONTKN	4.320	-0.080	34,696
HIL-WB	0.130	-0.080	4
HLIND	14.160	-0.080	561

Top 20 Losers (By %)			
STOCKS	CLOSING (RM)	+/- (%)	VOLUME ('00)
IUM-C89	0.020	-66.67	300
JTASA-C4	0.060	-60.00	100
BAUTO-C42	0.005	-50.00	500
DIGISTA-WC	0.005	-50.00	33
HSI-HZA	0.005	-50.00	870
MYEG-C6W	0.005	-50.00	176,800
WEGMANS-WC	0.005	-50.00	12,065
HM	0.125	-44.44	47,465
IOICORP-C62	0.035	-41.67	1,940
HIL-WB	0.130	-38.10	4
AXTERIA-WA	0.010	-33.33	2,124
COMPUTG	0.010	-33.33	110
HONGSENG	0.010	-33.33	20,686
KOSSAN-C75	0.100	-33.33	4,550
OMESTI-WC	0.020	-33.33	94,666
SAPNRC-WA	0.010	-33.33	51
VS-C88	0.010	-33.33	5,000
YB-WA	0.010	-33.33	1,200
ARMADA-C92	0.070	-30.00	7,157
SPSETIA-C85	0.025	-28.57	4,820

# 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

**DISCLAIMER:** The information is extracted from stockbrokers' commentaries and research reports and do not represent the views or opinions of Sun Media Corporation Sdn Bhd. It is not a solicitation, recommendation or an offer to buy or sell the equities featured. Sun Media Corporation shall not be liable or responsible for any consequences resulting from usage of the information.

## AHAM Capital taps Temenos' solution to drive automation

**KUALA LUMPUR:** Temenos, an open platform for banking, announced that AHAM Capital has selected its Multifonds Global Accounting, delivered as Software as a Service (SaaS) to drive scalable automation and future growth in the Malaysian market.

"We are delighted to be chosen and work closely with AHAM on this strategic project. As a recognised leader in the Malaysian asset management industry, AHAM sought a future-ready solution, and we are confident Multifonds SaaS will meet their aspirations.

"By enabling a truly client-centric asset management service, this partnership will support AHAM in driving innovation and accelerating business growth," said Temenos Multifonds managing director Oded Weiss in a statement.

Meanwhile, AHAM Capital chief technology officer Allen Woo said: "Temenos' fully automated solution empowers AHAM to streamline end-to-end operations, achieve high straight-through processing (STP) rates, and support our long-term expansion plans by enabling new products such as digital assets and exchange-traded funds (ETFs)."

The Multifonds SaaS solution will allow AHAM to benefit from the flexibility offered by a cloud-based deployment and full management of the application, removing the need to maintain software in-house, in addition to being able to connect to surrounding applications in the future with standard Multifonds application programming interfaces.

Temenos Multifonds was selected after a rigorous evaluation process and detailed proof of concept, recognising Multifonds as the best solution to support AHAM's growth over the long term. — Bernama

## Ringgit down slightly ahead of Fed FOMC meeting outcome

**THE** ringgit closed slightly lower against the US dollar yesterday as traders adopted a cautious approach ahead of the US Federal Open Market Committee (FOMC) meeting.

The FOMC's policy decisions are typically announced on the second day of the meeting, with a press conference held by Federal Reserve Chair Jerome Powell to provide further insights into the Fed's strategy moving forward.

At 6pm, the local currency depreciated to 4.4670/4725 versus the greenback from Tuesday's close of 4.4645/4690.

SPI Asset Management managing partner Stephen Innes said the market is widely anticipating a 25 basis points rate cut from the Fed this month, which could lend some support to the ringgit.

"However, significant uncertainty clouds future monetary policy due to the potential inflationary impact of tariff hikes by the incoming Donald Trump administration.

"Such measures could compel the Fed to moderate the pace of rate cuts in 2025, and posing challenges for the ringgit," he told Bernama.

The ringgit was traded lower against other major currencies. It was lower versus the British pound to 5.6673/6743 from 5.6646/6703, fell against the euro to 4.6877/6934 from 4.6815/6862, and diminished against the Japanese yen to 2.9074/9112 from 2.9028/9059 previously.

The ringgit was traded mixed against Asean currencies. It appreciated against the Singapore dollar to 3.3045/3088 versus 3.3048/3087 and improved vis-à-vis the Philippine peso to 7.577/58 from 7.58/7.59 at Tuesday's close.

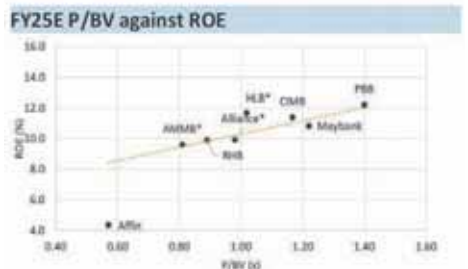
Meanwhile, the local note depreciated versus the Thai baht to 13.0378/0618 from 13.0236/0440.

## Exchange Rates

FOREIGN CURRENCY	SELLING TT/OD	BUYING TT	BUYING OD
1 US Dollar	4.5300	4.3920	4.3820
1 Australian Dollar	2.8870	2.7680	2.7520
1 Brunei Dollar	3.3560	3.2550	3.2470
1 Canadian Dollar	3.1620	3.0750	3.0630
1 Euro	4.7630	4.6050	4.5850
1 New Zealand Dollar	2.6190	2.5200	2.5040
1 Singapore Dollar	3.3560	3.2550	3.2470
1 Sterling Pound	5.7650	5.5790	5.5590
1 Swiss Franc	5.1110	4.8890	4.8740
100 UAE Dirham	124.7700	118.2300	118.0300
100 Bangladesh Taka	3.8700	3.6000	3.4000
100 Chinese Renminbi	62.6000	59.9200	N/A
100 Danish Krone	65.4500	60.1800	59.9800
100 Hongkong Dollar	58.9200	55.9400	55.7400
100 Indian Rupee	5.4200	5.0900	4.8900
100 Indonesian Rupiah	0.0292	0.0264	0.0214
100 Japanese Yen	2.9520	2.8550	2.8450
100 New Taiwan Dollar	N/A	N/A	N/A
100 Norwegian Krone	41.5500	38.1700	37.9700
100 Pakistan Rupee	1.6600	1.5500	1.3500
100 Philippine Peso	7.7900	7.3300	7.1300
100 Qatar Riyal	125.5900	119.2300	119.0300
100 Saudi Riyal	121.8400	115.6600	115.4600
100 South Africa Rand	25.9700	23.4400	23.2400
100 Sri Lanka Rupee	1.6000	1.4700	1.2700
100 Swedish Krona	42.6600	38.8200	38.6200
100 Thai Baht	13.8500	12.2700	11.8700

Source: Malayan Banking Bhd/Bernama

## Banking Overweight



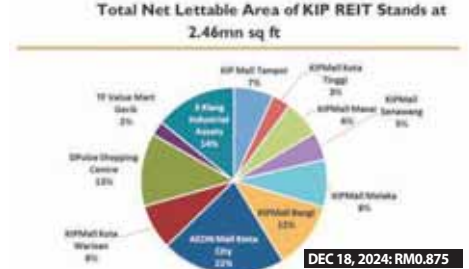
Source: Phillip Research forecasts

**BANK** Negara Malaysia (BNM) has introduced a new exposure draft that proposes the abolition of the Rule of 78 method for calculating interest charges on personal financing (PF) products. This change will be implemented through amendments to the Hire Purchase Act 1967, with plans to table the legislation in Parliament in 1H25. BNM is also considering reducing the maximum tenure for PF products from 10 years to 7 years, subject to public feedback.

The Rule of 78 is a method commonly used by banks to front-load interest charges payments, where borrowers pay a higher proportion of interest earlier in the loan tenure. These structures benefit banks in the short term as they receive more interest upfront but discourage borrowers from making early repayments due to minimal interest savings. Most PF products are structured this way. If banks can no longer benefit from front-loaded interest income and early loan repayments become frequent, this would increase reinvestment risk for banks, as they may face higher portfolio turnover and be forced to redeploy funds in potentially lower-yielding assets.

However, this may be manageable if banks could raise their effective interest rates to compensate for the reduced interest, hence we think the net effect on interest income could be positive. In addition to that, shifting to a variable-rate PF loan (similar to RHB) would allow the bank to benefit from a rising interest rate environment. Banks with the largest exposure to PF is Alliance (11%), followed by Affin (6%), CIMB (6%) and RHB (6%). Globally, the Rule of 78 has faced criticism for being unfair to borrowers, and its removal is seen as a step forward in consumer protection. — Philip Capital Research, Dec 18

## KIP Real Estate Investment Trust Buy. Target price: RM1.15



Source: TA Research, KIPREIT

**KIP** Real Estate Investment Trust (KIP REIT) is wrapping up an eventful 2024 with the early completion of the DPulze Shopping Centre (DPulze) acquisition last week, following the successful acquisition of TF Value Mart Gerik in November. Both transactions were finalised ahead of their initial Q1'25 timeline.

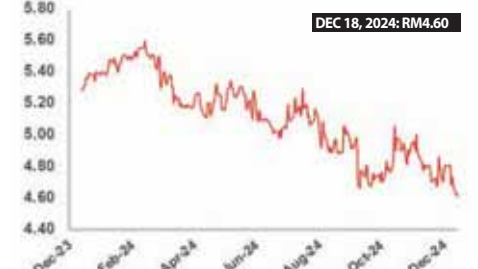
This year, KIP REIT announced three major acquisitions totalling RM433.1 million: DPulze, TF Value Mart Gerik, and four industrial properties, with the latter set to be completed by mid-2026. The fully occupied DPulze, located in Cyberjaya, Selangor, is KIP REIT's largest acquisition since its IPO, adding 311,499 sq ft of net lettable area (NLA). Meanwhile, TF Value Mart Gerik, with an NLA of 60,895 sq ft, offers strong rental growth potential and an attractive 7.5% initial yield.

With the two new retail assets, KIP REIT's portfolio now comprises 13 properties with a total NLA of 2.46 million sq ft, including seven KIP Malls, AEON Mall Kinta City, and three industrial properties in Klang.

We believe KIP REIT's recent acquisitions are a significant step toward its target of expanding its portfolio value to RM2 billion within the next three years, up from RM1.4 billion currently. These transactions highlight KIP REIT's ability to execute its strategy of accretive growth through high-quality retail, industrial, and commercial properties. KIP REIT is well-positioned to achieve its target by leveraging its Right of First Refusal on two pipeline assets — KIP Mall Desa Coalfields and KIP Mall Kuantan — while actively pursuing third-party opportunities to further diversify its portfolio.

BUY with RM1.15 TP. — TA Research, Dec 18

## TIME dotCom Bhd Outperform. Target price: RM5.91



Source: Kenanga Research

**TIMECOM** is well positioned to capitalize on soaring internet traffic and data transmission driven by new AI data centres (DC) in Malaysia.

Internet traffic is soaring due to 5G adoption and traction in online activities (e.g. streaming, social media, online gaming, remote working, and e-commerce). Looking ahead, we believe generative AI (Gen AI) will drive the next stage of growth. Enterprises are amassing vast volumes of data for AI model training and inference. These data sets are hosted in DCs that are rapidly proliferating in Malaysia. According to DCByte, DC capacity in Malaysia is forecast to surge 11-fold from 280MW in Q1'24 to more than 3.2GW by 2028. Against this influx of DCs and internet traffic, we expect demand to accelerate for TIMECOM's global and terrestrial bandwidth services. Its extensive network of fiber optics and submarine cables facilitate the transmission of data between DCs and end-users.

We expect its 30%-owned AIMS, which owns and operates DCs, to expedite its expansion in SEA, backed by the financial clout and track record of its parent, Digital Bridge Group. Demand for DC co-location (Co-Lo) services in Southeast Asia (SEA) is set to ramp up given the trends above. Moreover, new regulations mandating local data storage and residency have emerged in Asean. This includes the Personal Data Protection Act 2022 (Thailand), Risk Management in Technology 2020 (Malaysia), and Law on Cybersecurity 2022 (Vietnam). The Co-Lo market in major Asean markets are expected to expand at CAGR of 15%-28% in 2023-29. Moreover, newbuild DCs are in demand to run AI workloads and offer GPU-as-a-service.

OUTPERFORM with RM5.91 TP. — Kenanga Research, Dec 18



## WEEKLY FOCUS

**MONDAY**  
Technology and social media

**TUESDAY**  
Travel and leisure

**WEDNESDAY**  
Fashion and beauty

**THURSDAY**  
Home and living

**FRIDAY**  
Food and beverage

— FREEPIK/PIK

# Green Christmas

Practise sustainability this festive season — **P22**

BY MARK MATHEN VICTOR

**H**OLIDAY seasons are typically a season of joy, celebration and unfortunately, excessive waste. This year, transform the approach to Christmas decorations by embracing environmentally-friendly options that are both beautiful and kind to the planet.

From natural materials to upcycled creations, these sustainable decor ideas will help create a magical Christmas atmosphere while reducing the environmental footprint.

#### Natural greenery decor

Skip the artificial garlands and embrace nature's beauty. Use locally sourced pine branches and evergreen clippings to create stunning wreaths, table centrepieces and mantel decorations.

These natural elements not only look elegant but are completely biodegradable and can be composted after the holidays. Forage responsibly from your own garden or local parks, or purchase from sustainable local nurseries.

#### Upcycled ornament magic

Transform discarded materials into unique tree decorations. Mason jar lids, vintage buttons, wine corks and old sheet music can be re-purposed into charming ornaments. Collect fabric scraps, wooden discs and other craft materials to create personalised decorations that tell a story.

Children can participate in ornament-making, turning it into a fun family activity that teaches creativity and sustainability.

#### Greener lighting solutions

Replace traditional string lights with LED alternatives that consume significantly less energy. Solar-powered outdoor lights and battery-operated LED candles provide warm, inviting illumination without increasing carbon footprint. Look for lights made from recycled materials or those produced by companies with strong environmental commitments.

#### Sustainable wrapping alternatives

Traditional wrapping paper creates massive amounts of waste during the



Real potted trees as Christmas trees allow sustainability for future uses. – **ALL PICS BY FREEPIK**

# Sustainable Christmas

## ➤ Eco-decor transformations for this festive season

holidays. Opt for reusable fabric wraps, such as the Japanese *furoshiki* technique, recycled brown paper decorated with natural elements or decorative tea towels that become part of the gift. Fabric gift bags can be reused for multiple years, reducing annual packaging waste.

#### Living Christmas tree

Unlike Western countries, the Christmas trees used by those celebrating the festivities are often artificial and leave a carbon footprint from its production. Instead of the latter, opt for potted living trees that can be replanted after December.

Consider purchasing smaller potted evergreen to decorate and later plant in the garden, or seek out nurseries that offer rental programmes for live trees. This approach provides a long-term environmental benefit and creates a meaningful holiday tradition.



Adapt the cloth-wrapping technique of the Japanese rather than the usual paper wrappers.

#### Handcrafted natural decorations

Instead of the typical plastic decorations, create your own using pinecones, dried citrus slices, cinnamon sticks and other natural ingredients.

Dehydrated orange slices strung together make beautiful garlands, while pinecones can be painted or left natural for rustic ornaments. These decorations are biodegradable, chemical-free and can often be composted after the holidays.



Using recycled paper as decoration is a great alternative.

#### Vintage, secondhand decor

Explore thrift stores, antique shops, and online marketplaces for unique vintage Christmas decorations. Secondhand ornaments and decor not only reduce demand for new manufacturing but also add character and history to your holiday styling. Vintage glass baubles, ceramic figurines and classic candle holders can create a timeless, sustainable aesthetic.

#### Minimalist paper decorations

Utilise recycled paper to create intricate snowflakes, paper chains and origami decorations. These lightweight, biodegradable ornaments can be composted after the holiday season and require

minimal resources to create. Their creation can also be a group activity for the children in your family.

#### Natural fibre textiles

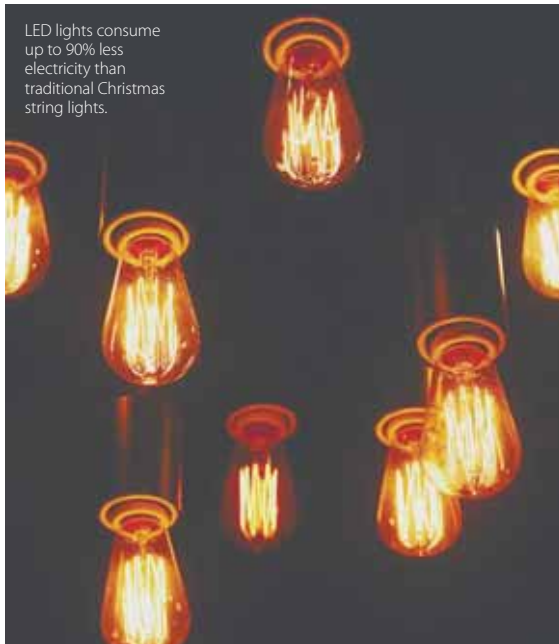
Choose table runners, stockings and tree skirts made from organic cotton, hemp or bamboo. These sustainable fabrics are biodegradable, require less water to produce and often support fair trade practices. Look for textiles in natural colour palettes or minimalist designs that can be used across multiple holiday seasons.

#### DIY scent diffusers and natural aromatics

Create holiday ambience with natural aromatics like simmering

pots with cinnamon sticks, orange peels and cloves. Alternatively, craft your own essential oil diffuser blends or create pomanders using oranges studded with cloves. These natural approaches provide festive fragrances without synthetic air fresheners.

Adopting these eco-friendly decoration strategies for Christmas can lead to an equally beautiful, festive experience that rivals those with traditional festive decorations using plastic and flown in from China on clouds of carbon emission. Each small change this festive season will contribute to a more sustainable holiday celebration.



LED lights consume up to 90% less electricity than traditional Christmas string lights.



Vinterfint garland.

# Elevate your Christmas decor

➤ Deck your home with class trinkets

**N**OTHING beats a hearty dinner with the family on Christmas Eve and unwrapping gifts on Christmas morning. Make these festive moments extra special with thoughtful touches and creative ideas. From stunning table settings to quirky gift presentations, here is how you can up your holiday game.

### Make gifting fun

Decorating your home for the holidays is a classic but why not mix things up this year? As you deck the halls with decorative accents such as beautiful garlands and wreaths, turn present-opening into a delightful surprise by hiding your presents (in plain sight or in your decorative Christmas stockings) for a fun game of hide and seek.

### Presentation that pops

Add a touch of wonderland to your holiday celebrations. Light up your home entrance and outdoor patios with these snowflake light sticks and make your home feel extra inviting. When lit, they emit a warm white glow that just creates that romantic, festive ambience.

### Christmas grand feast

If you are hosting a big festive dinner or gathering cosily at the breakfast nook with your family, set a festive table that is sure to impress. Why not make use of your extra Christmas decor instead of opting for the normal centrepieces. Arrange candles in a sleek holder surrounded by pinecones or baubles for an instant vibe.



Vinterfint animal baubles.



Vinterfint Christmas stocking.



Vinterfint candle holder.



Vinterfint tealight holder.

### Dress up your tree

The Christmas tree is the centrepiece of your festive decor, so why not make it stand out? Ribbons are all the rage this season but with a mix of traditional and quirky elements, you can give your tree a look that feels fresh, unique and absolutely stunning. Add a tree skirt to provide a festive foundation for your Christmas tree and

beautiful backdrop for your wrapped gifts for a cleaner and more polished look.

Do not miss out on this Christmas deal - until Jan 2, buy two of the same products at Ikea for the price of one. This offer is for Vinterfint and Strala products only.

Stock up on these festive must-haves to double the holiday cheer!

## Simple gym workouts for senior citizens

**MORE** elderly folks are opting to live in high rise residences. This is often because they no longer require the extra space of landed properties as their kids have left the family home. This is not to mention the convenience of a smaller unit alongside the various on-site amenities such as swimming pools, jogging tracks and gymnasiums that encourage a more active lifestyle.

However, it can safely be said gyms at many condos are under-utilised by this demographic. To get started in the gym, here are a few suggested workouts for senior citizens to try out:

### Treadmills

When walking outdoors is not feasible due to the weather, using a gym's treadmill is a great way to maintain fitness. These machines have the added advantage of speed and incline control, allowing for a highly customised workout to suit individual preferences. Most treadmills will be equipped with displays, so users can monitor their



There are plenty of online resources to help senior citizens decide which workouts are appropriate. - 123RFPIC

footsteps, average speed and even estimated calories burnt. This low-impact workout is ideal for those who

have muscular or joint pain. Walking at one's own pace, no matter how slowly, can still be beneficial.

### Stationary bikes

Cycling Spin bikes, also known as stationary bikes, provide an excellent low-impact exercise suitable for all fitness levels. These stationary bikes deliver a great cardiovascular workout while enhancing muscle strength, mobility and endurance. Place a mobile phone on the dash and the workout can be accompanied by some viewing entertainment in the shape of a favourite TV series. Make sure the tension or weight load is adjusted to allow for a less-strenuous workout in the beginning before slowly moving towards heavier loads. A slow and easy transition makes this more enjoyable than suddenly subjecting aging limbs to a full-on strenuous workout.

### Weights and barbells

Weight training starting with low-intensity exercises can help prepare senior citizens for more vigorous workouts. As muscles become

accustomed to regular activity, senior citizens can incorporate resistance into their routine with moderate body weight or strength training to counteract the loss of muscle mass, known as sarcopenia. Free weights and resistance bands offer a variety of movement options to gradually increase workout intensity.

### Online resources

Of course, most senior citizens will not be looking to get a personal trainer to supervise their workouts. But fret not, as there are plenty of online resources to help find the right gym workout solutions. There are plenty of sites catering to various age groups and those with specific medical conditions.

Take it one slow step at a time. Remember "health is wealth", so do proceed with caution. No point getting hurt in the process as gym workouts are meant to be fun! - by R.BALA

# End of year K-drama bonanza

➤ Ultimate Korean series binge list this December

**T**HE end of the year is packed with highly anticipated K-drama premieres. From romantic comedies to intense thrillers and historical epics, the month of December promises to deliver a blend of emotions, drama and excitement.

Here is a deep dive into the top dramas debuting this month for your binge list!

## Cinderella Game

Premiere date: Dec 2 on KBS2 and Viki  
 Starring: Han Groo, Na Young-Hee, Choi Sang, Kwon Do-Hyung

The riveting tale of revenge and self-discovery begins with Koo Ha-Na, a young woman betrayed by her adoptive family. Determined to reclaim her life, she crosses paths with Hwang Jin-Gu, a powerful CEO who slowly understands her struggles. Expect twists, high-stakes betrayal and a touch of unexpected romance.



Namib. – PIC FROM FACEBOOK @KDRAMAJAGIYA

## To My Lonely Sister

Premiere date: Dec 10 on KBS and Viki  
 Starring: Oh Ye-Ju, Kim Kang-Min, Park Ho-San, Yang Ui-Jin

*To My Lonely Sister* is a heartwarming family drama that will air as part of KBS Drama Special 2024. The series revolves around an extroverted brother who devises a plan to coax his introverted sister out of her shell and into the world.

## Who Is She?

Premiere date: Dec 18 on KBS  
 Starring: Kim Hae-Sook, Jung Ji-So, Jin Young, Chae Won-Bin

*Who Is She?* is a unique fantasy drama that follows the story of Oh Mal-Soon, a grandmother whose appearance magically reverts to her youthful self. Under the alias Oh Doo-Ri, played by Jung Ji-So, she embarks on a journey to fulfill her childhood dream of becoming a K-pop idol.

As Doo-Ri navigates the competitive world of K-pop, she encounters Daniel Han, a



Sorry Not Sorry. – PIC FROM FACEBOOK @130.KDRAMAS



Light Shop. – DISNEY+HOTSTARPIC

## Light Shop

Premiere date: Dec 4 on Disney+ Hotstar  
 Starring: Ju Ji-Hoon, Park Bo-Young, Kim Min-Ha, Kim Seol-Hyun

Adapted from a popular webtoon, *Light Shop* brings another emotional masterpiece from the creator of *Moving*. A group of strangers drawn to a mysterious shop are forced to confront their pasts, guided by Jung Won-Young (Ju Ji-Hoon). This series is poised to touch viewers' hearts with deep character arcs and heart-wrenching stories.

## Sorry Not Sorry

Premiere date: Dec 5 on KBS  
 Starring: Jeon So-Min, Choi Daniel, Gong Min-Jung, Jang Hee-Ryung

*Sorry Not Sorry* is a comedic drama starring Jeon So-Min (known for her role in *Cleaning Up*). The series follows Ji Song-i, a woman whose life takes an unexpected turn when she is suddenly dumped before her wedding. Forced to move into her newlywed home and shoulder the mortgage alone, she decides to blend in with the other wives and mothers in the neighbourhood by pretending to be married. Joining So-Min is Gong Min-Jung (from *Marry My Husband*), who portrays Choi Ha-Na, an ambitious working mother with a complex past with Song-i. The cast also includes Jang Hee-Ryung, who plays An Chan-Yang, a pottery teacher with a social media addiction.



To My Lonely Sister. – PIC FROM FACEBOOK @KOREANARTISTS

talented music producer played by Jin Young. Despite his successful career, Daniel's life takes an unexpected turn when he meets the enigmatic Doo-Ri. Meanwhile, Mal-Soon's granddaughter Choi Ha-Na makes a bold decision to forgo traditional education and pursue a career in the entertainment industry.

## Check-in Hanyang

Premiere date: Dec 21 on Channel A  
 Starring: Bae In-Hyuk, Kim Ji-Eun, Jung Gun-Joo, Park Jae-Chan

*Check-in Hanyang* is a historical drama set in the Joseon era. The series follows the story of two main characters: Lee Eun, a prince who goes undercover as a commoner, and Hong Seok-Soo, a woman who disguises herself as a man to work at a grand guesthouse. As they navigate the challenges of their hidden identities, they form a close bond with the other employees of the guesthouse, including the reluctant heir Cheon Joon-Hwa and Go Soo-Ra, whose family's fortunes are dwindling.

## Namib

Premiere date: Dec 23 on ENA  
 Starring: Go Hyun-Jung, Ryeoun, Yoon Sang-Hyun

*Namib* is a captivating drama set against the backdrop of the competitive K-pop industry. It follows the story of Kang Soo-Hyun, a seasoned idol group producer who, after facing a career setback, takes a chance on a promising but overlooked trainee named Yoo Jin-Woo. Determined to revive their careers, Soo-Hyun takes on the challenge of nurturing Jin-Woo into a star. Meanwhile, her husband, a former music producer who had taken a break to care for their hearing-impaired son, rekindles his passion for music and joins forces with Soo-Hyun to guide Jin-Woo's journey to stardom.

## Squid Game 2

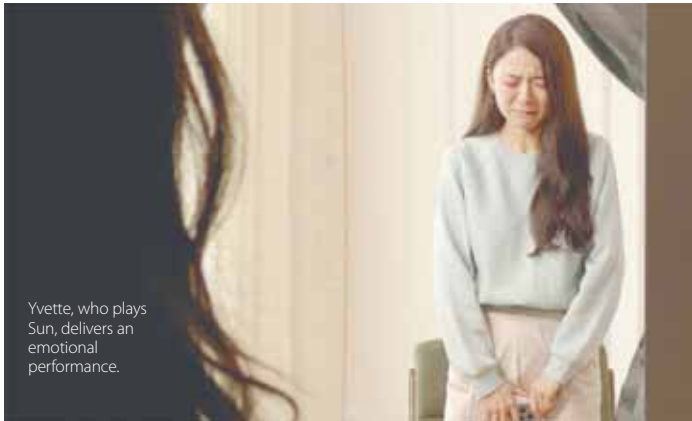
Premiere date: Dec 26 on Netflix  
 Starring: Lee Jung-Jae, Wi Ha-Joon, T.O.P, Jo Yu-Ri

The global phenomenon returns with more deadly games and unexpected alliances. Seong Gi-Hun is back but this time the stakes and emotions are even higher. Get ready for another adrenaline-fueled season that promises to shock and thrill. – Hallybeat



Squid Game 2. – NETFLIXPIC





Yvette, who plays Sun, delivers an emotional performance.



The film revolves around a haunted phone that unleashes a terrifying sequence of events.

BY YASMIN ZULRAEZ

**DIRECTED** by Danny Pang, *Haunting Call* delivers a supernatural horror-thriller that merges modern technology with age-old ghostly revenge. The film revolves around a haunted smartphone and the terrifying chain of events it triggers. While it is not without flaws, the movie manages to hold its ground as a watchable, if somewhat underwhelming, addition to the psychological horror genre.

#### Concept with untapped potential

The premise of *Haunting Call* is undoubtedly intriguing, a bullied high school girl's spirit tied to her smartphone uses it to exact revenge. The storyline delves into themes of bullying, regret and redemption, all of which carry strong emotional resonance.

However, the execution leaves much to be desired. The narrative occasionally feels rushed and some scenes lack the tension and polish needed to elevate the film beyond a simple revenge tale.

The film's unique selling point: the entire movie being shot using smartphones adds an interesting dimension. It enhances the sense of intimacy and realism, especially during key scenes of supernatural activity. However, this choice occasionally works against the film, with certain sequences feeling visually constrained.

#### Decent performances

Lin delivers a commendable performance as Lily, the YouTuber drawn into the ghostly drama. Her character's journey from heartbreak to confronting her past bullying is well-portrayed and she carries much of the film's emotional weight. Jessica Chan as Xiaoya brings a chilling presence to her role as the vengeful ghost, especially when her quiet anguish turns into explosive rage.

The supporting cast, however, swings between solid and melodramatic. Kiki Tam's Betty, the main antagonist, is as over-the-top as a high school bully can get, delivering lines that often lean into caricature. Carmen Chan and Cherry Lee, as Kiki and Rou Rou, are similarly exaggerated, which detracts from the film's more serious undertones. While the performances fit the movie's tone, they sometimes border on unintentional comedy, which can be both amusing and distracting.

#### Chilling scenes with side of cheese

Director Pang knows how to create suspense, this expertise shines in some of the film's key scenes. The haunted phone sequences, complete with eerie

**Cast:** Lin Min Chen, Jessica Chan, Yvette Chan, Kiki Tam, Carmen Chan, Cherry Lee, Justina Lan

**Director:** Danny Pang

#### E-VALUE

5

ACTING

5

PLOT

5



Lin delivers a commendable performance as Lily, a YouTuber drawn into a ghostly drama. — PICS COURTESY OF MULTIMEDIA ENTERTAINMENT

## Digital dive into supernatural

➤ Flawed yet entertaining this horror flick keeps you hooked despite its shortcomings

messages, mysterious images and disturbing calls are genuinely unsettling. The vengeance scenes, in which Xiaoya's spirit confronts her tormentors, are tailored to each character's fears, making them creative and memorable.

However, the film does not always maintain its tension. Some moments are unintentionally funny due to overly dramatic acting or questionable special effects. While these missteps dilute the scares, they make the film oddly endearing, adding an unintentional layer of humour that keeps the audience entertained.

#### Budget that limits its reach

It is clear that *Haunting Call* had ambitious ideas, but its budget constraints are evident. The special effects, while serviceable, lack the polish needed to immerse viewers in the supernatural world fully. Certain sequences that could have been visually stunning instead feel low-budget and uninspired.

The film could have been a standout in the genre with more time and resources. The underlying story has enough depth and intrigue to captivate audiences, but the execution needs to work on bringing it all together.

Despite its flaws, *Haunting Call* remains an entertaining watch for fans of supernatural thrillers. Its unique premise and creative use of smartphones set it apart from other horror films, even if the final product does not fully capitalise on its potential.

The movie's tone oscillates between serious and unintentional comedic, creating an experience best enjoyed with a lighthearted mindset. It is not the kind of horror film that will keep you up at night, but it offers enough thrills and laughs to make it worth a casual watch.

#### Flawed but fun horror-thriller

*Haunting Call* is not the next great horror classic but it does not need to be. It is a decent enough film for viewers looking for something fresh and fun without high expectations. While the plot had the potential to deliver a truly chilling experience, budget limitations and uneven execution hold it back.

That said, the film's unique premise and its mix of suspense and accidental humour make it an enjoyable ride. Approach it with an open mind, embrace the unintentional laughs and you will be entertained by this haunted tale of revenge and redemption.



*Haunting Call* is a supernatural thriller with a modern twist that will resonate with modern audiences.



SEAMLESS JOURNEY WITH JOJO FLIGHT

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Sit (centre), Lai (second from left) and 3P in the music video of *Yes Sir*.

# CNY hit *Yes Sir* garners 1m YouTube views

**A**s the Year of the Snake approaches, *Yes Sir* – a mandarin festive song co-produced by hamper provider Jin Ye Ye and artistes from Malaysia, Singapore and Hong Kong – has become the first Snake Year Chinese New Year (CNY) song in Malaysia to surpass one million views on YouTube.

This song is an uplifting musical creation, a heartfelt tribute to the CNY traditions and the rich heritage of the Malaysian Chinese gift-giving culture.

## ► Festive song celebrates culture of gift-giving

Featuring Malaysian group 3P, Hong Kong actress Nancy Sit and Singaporean comedian Jaspers Lai, it cleverly combines the homophones of “snake” and “sir”, symbolising hopes for the new year and representing the gratitude and sincerity embodied in the Malaysian Chinese culture of gift-giving.

This tradition not only reflects the deep roots of Chinese heritage but also presents a virtuous expression of gratitude, fostering warmth and connection among people.

The signature “salute” gesture in *Yes Sir* pays homage to the enduring mission of preserving and passing down this cherished tradition.



Zakir has passed on aged 73.

– PIC FROM FACEBOOK @SHANIARSHAD

# Renowned Indian tabla player dies at 73

**RENOWNED** India-born tabla player Zakir Hussain has died at the age of 73.

Based in the US, the musician passed away at a hospital in San Francisco.

He had been receiving treatment for a heart ailment for the last two weeks and died early Monday due to complications from idiopathic pulmonary fibrosis, a lung disease, according to media reports citing his family.

One of the best percussionists, Zakir popularised the art of tabla playing. He did so with electrifying fusion music in bands such as Shakti as well as on seminal recordings such as *Making Music* (1987). The latter album featured a perfect crossover of both Eastern and Western music traditions with European and Indian musicians jamming in perfect harmony.

Born in Mumbai in 1951, he began learning music at an early age from his father and great tabla player Ustad Alla Rakha.

Zakir is survived by his wife Antonia Minneola and daughters Anisa Qureshi and Isabella Qureshi.

His fans mourned the maestro’s death as an irreparable loss to the world of Indian classical music. – Bernama



Exists performed its timeless hit song *Jesnita*.



Ella rolled back the years with her energetic performance.



The electrifying finale of a night filled with rock nostalgia.

# Thrilling fans with rock nostalgia in Johor Bahru

**THE** concert *A Night to Remember: Rock Nostalgia* brought rock nostalgia to life at the Arena Larkin Indoor Stadium in Johor last Saturday with electrifying performances by Ella, Masdo and Exists.

The concert featured an unforgettable blend of iconic hits such as *Gemilang*, *Teruna & Dara* and *Rahsia Pohon Cemara*, transporting fans back in time and evoking cherished memories of local artistes who have long graced Malaysia’s music industry. Malaysia’s Queen of Rock Ella delivered a breathtaking performance, energising the audience with her passion and charisma.

“After more than 10 years of not performing a concert in Johor, being on stage tonight is truly exhilarating,” said Ella.

Fans were not only treated to iconic tunes but also elevated the spirit of nostalgia through their

creative outfits. The vibrant atmosphere was filled with fans dressing up to embody their favourite music legends.

“Seeing so many fans styled as our personas feels like performing in the 1970s. Their energy made us even more fired up on stage,” said Masdo.

Exists also expressed joy in reconnecting with its audience.

“We are deeply moved to see how our music is still appreciated to this day. Watching a new generation sing along to our songs with such enthusiasm is truly extraordinary,” said Exists.

Organised by Coaction Events in collaboration with Tourism Johor, the concert is part of the initiative to promote Johor as a premier destination for world-class events leading up to Visit Johor 2026.



Masdo performed seven songs, including *Dinda*, *Bunga*, *Teruna & Dara* and *Janji Manis*.





## European Super League promoters launch Unify League

**THE** promoters of a proposed European Super League have called on Uefa and Fifa to recognise their new competition, which they relaunched yesterday as the Unify League.

It is the latest attempt by A22 to get the competition off the ground after the original European Super League (ESL), backed by 12 of the continent's biggest clubs, was controversially launched in 2021 only for support to collapse.

Unlike the original plans which guaranteed the 12 clubs a place in the ESL, A22 says the new 96-club format across four leagues would be merit-based and more competitive than Uefa's current club competitions.

It also promised free streaming for fans on its own advertising-backed platform and a return to the home and away format ditched in the revamped Champions League group phase.

"A key feature is a revised qualification system in which club participation is based on annual, domestic league performance," A22 said in a statement yesterday outlining plans for the midweek competition.

A22 CEO Bernd Reichart said the proposed new competition would help address challenges in football such as rising subscription costs for fans, insufficient investment in women's football and dissatisfaction with the format and governance of the current pan-European competitions.

"We are convinced that with our format being meritocratic and being compatible with the calendar we have the right to establish such a competition, talk to clubs and start implementing it," Reichart told Reuters in Madrid.

The new format, which has no definite start date, would comprise 32 clubs split into a Star and Gold League, 32 in a Blue League and 32 in a Union League.

Group matches would run from September to April followed by an eight-club knockout phase.

While last year's ECJ ruling, and a similar one by a Spanish court in May, did not lead to a rush of clubs wanting to be involved in the new competition, Reichart said that it had given them confidence to re-engage with the plan.

UEFA insisted that rules it brought in since the initial ESL launch ensured it now complied with EU law. – Reuters

# Juve storm into quarters

*Koopmeiners stunner sends 15-time winners into last eight of Italian Cup*

**HOLDERS** Juventus progressed to the quarterfinals of the Italian Cup with a 4-0 win at home to Cagliari yesterday.

Dusan Vlahovic slotted home a first half opener, before Teun Koopmeiners wrapped up the last-16 tie for the 15-time winners with a sensational free-kick from distance.

Francisco Conceicao and Nico Gonzalez netted late to underline an emphatic performance by the Old Lady.

"It was a good performance," Juve coach Thiago Motta told *Canale 5*.

"These lads are going through a tough situation in the right way, giving their all in every training session," he added of his players who have endured a stop-start domestic campaign as they sit sixth in the league table.

"Sometimes, they have the freedom to express their emotions, we need them. Sometimes we are able to have a positive result and sometimes we are not, even if we didn't lose.

"We have the level to perform, especially when players like Nico (Gonzalez) return."

Gonzalez made a brief substitute appearance against Venezia, having been out of action with a muscle injury for over two months.

"The first thing I wanted was to feel good and help the team," Gonzalez said. "We have to stay united and happy, I'm happy with the goal and the victory."

Juve join Lazio, Empoli, Bologna and AC Milan in the next stage of the cup.

Vlahovic put the home side in front one minute before halftime when he swivelled smartly on a pass to feet from Kenan Yildiz and rolled the ball into the far corner.

Summer signing Koopmeiners then notched up his second goal for Juve with an unstoppable left-footed freekick from 25 metres out in the 53rd minute.

Vlahovic had the ball in the net twice more for Juve as they pressed forward in search of a third, but was on both occasions denied by the assistant's flag for offside.

Conceicao eventually made it three on 80 minutes with a whipped finish after cutting in

from the right flank and Gonzalez chipped home a fourth with one minute remaining.

Vlahovic was pleased to hear the applause of the Juventus supporters when he scored, after taking their insults at the weekend.

Vlahovic netted a late equaliser in Saturday's 2-2 draw with Venezia but the Juventus players were greeted with the boos and jeers of their fans, unhappy with another poor performance and their fourth successive stalemate in the league.

The Serbian striker was the main target of their insults, despite the goal, after Vlahovic raised his thumb to the fans ironically, but all is forgiven, with the crowd cheering him before the Cagliari match and again after he opened the scoring.

"The applause of the fans makes me very happy, this is one of the biggest clubs in Europe with a huge fan base," Vlahovic told broadcaster *Mediaset*.

"I'm sorry for what happened on Saturday. Now we have to continue like this, all united. Every victory gives us confidence but we think game by game." – AFP/Reuters

## Vinicius, Bonmati named Fifa Best players 2024

**REAL MADRID** attacker Vinicius Junior won the Fifa Best men's player of the year award at a ceremony in Doha on Tuesday, while Barcelona midfielder Aitana Bonmati picked up the women's prize for the second time.

The award comes two months after 24-year-old Vinicius was second in the *Ballon d'Or*, with Real electing to snub the ceremony when they found out beforehand that Manchester City midfielder Rodri was set to win the trophy.

But the Brazilian was this time on hand to collect the prize in person as he is in Qatar with his club ahead of their Intercontinental Cup final clash with Mexico's Pachuca overnight.

"Thank you very much. I don't know where to start. It was impossible to think of getting here. I grew up in a world of poverty, of organised crime. It's for all the children who grow up in that world. I thank everyone who voted for me," Vinicius said on stage.

"(Thank you) To my family, to the club, to my teammates, to Carletto (Madrid coach Carlo Ancelotti), who always helps me.

"To everyone who helped make my dream come true. I hope to be at Madrid for many years, because it is the best club in the world. To Flamengo (his first club in Brazil). To my

teammates in my national team. And to my country, which always supports me in my work."

Vinicius succeeds Lionel Messi as the Fifa Best men's player after the Argentinian scooped up the last two editions of the award.

The 26-year-old Spaniard Bonmati picked up the Best women's player award for the second year running, adding to the two *Ballon d'Or* trophies she already boasts.

"I'm grateful, I'm proud to receive this award," Bonmati said via video link from Barcelona's Olympic stadium.

Last term, Bonmati led Barcelona to a historic continental quadruple of titles and claimed the Nations League with her national team.

She won every trophy available to her in club football in 2023/24 – the Spanish league, the Copa de la Reina, the Supercopa de Espana and a second-successive Women's Champions League.

Manchester United's Argentine forward Alejandro Garnacho won the Puskas award for the best goal of the year for his spectacular bicycle kick against Everton in the Premier League. – AFP



Vinicius Junior.  
– AFP/PC

Aitana Bonmati.

## Ronaldo wants to take reins of Brazilian football

**BRAZIL** legend Ronaldo has confirmed he wants to become president of the country's football governing body to address a "deep crisis" the sport is facing nationally.

"I have hundreds of motivations, but I think the biggest of them is really to restore international respect to Brazilian football," he said in an interview on Monday with the *Globoesporte* website.

Ronaldo said he wanted to be an "alternative for significant change" as candidate for the job of running the Brazilian

Football Confederation (CBF).

"O Fenomeno" (The Phenomenon), as the 48-year-old became known over the course of his 1993-2011 career, said he wants to use the CBF presidency to help Brazil's national team to regain its glory as five-time world champions.

"The *Selecao* has to recover its prestige. I'll do everything so that the players understand the historic importance of playing for the national team," he said.

Ronaldo scored both goals when Brazil beat

Germany in the 2002 World Cup final in Japan, and was twice winner of the *Ballon d'Or*.

To lodge his CBF candidacy, he needs the support of Brazilian regional clubs and federations.

To get those, he promised to travel "all around Brazil" and share the "incredible plans" he has for the sport.

The date of the next CBF election has not yet been set, but should happen between March 2025 and March 2026, according to Brazilian media.

Currently coached by Dorival Junior, the *Selecao* are fifth in South America qualifying for the 2026 World Cup tournament, seven points behind leaders Argentina.

"My problem is not Ednaldo. The problem is much deeper. My goal is to bring the people closer to the *Selecao*. Today, the people are indifferent when the *Selecao* plays," Ronaldo told *Globoesporte*.

"I am an alternative of significant change for Brazilian football, which is going through a deep crisis," he said. – AFP

# 'I have not done anything wrong'

BY JAMIE GARDNER

Mudryk determined to clear name after testing positive for banned substance

**C**HELSEA'S Ukraine forward Mykhailo Mudryk will battle to prove his innocence after testing positive for a banned substance, with the player insisting: "I know I have not done anything wrong."

The 23-year-old has been provisionally suspended after an analysis of a urine sample taken as part of a test conducted in the UK detected the presence of the banned substance.

Sources said that Mudryk believes the adverse finding was the result of a contaminated supplement. It is understood Mudryk's B sample has not been tested yet.

The player is determined to clear his name and wrote on his *Instagram* account: "I can confirm that I have been notified that a sample I provided to the FA contained a banned substance."

"This has come as a complete shock as I have never knowingly used any banned substances or broken any rules, and am working closely with my team to investigate how this could have happened."

"I know that I have not done anything wrong and remain hopeful that I will be back on the pitch soon."

"I cannot say any more now due to the confidentiality of the process, but I will as soon as I can."

Sources said that Mudryk had undergone an earlier test in August which came back clear.

Chelsea issued a statement yesterday confirming they had been notified of an "adverse finding" in a sample provided by Mudryk.

"Chelsea Football Club can confirm the Football Association recently contacted our player Mykhailo Mudryk concerning an adverse finding in a routine urine test," the club's statement said.

"Both the club and Mykhailo fully support the FA's testing

programme and all our players, including Mykhailo, are regularly tested.

"Mykhailo has confirmed categorically that he has never knowingly used any banned substances."

"Both Mykhailo and the club will now work with the relevant authorities to establish what has caused the adverse finding. The club will not be commenting any further."

The FA and the Professional Footballers' Association have not commented on the matter.

Mudryk could receive a lengthy ban from football if his "B" sample also tests positive for any banned substances.

Paul Pogba was initially suspended for four years after returning a sample which contained DHEA, a substance known to enhance testosterone levels.

Following a successful appeal, the ban was

eventually reduced to 18 months and the Frenchman will be free to play in matches from March next year.

Mudryk last played for Chelsea in the Conference League match against Heidenheim on Nov 28, scoring the Blues' second goal in a 2-0 win.

He was an unused substitute for the Premier League match against Aston Villa on December 1.

Mudryk joined Chelsea in a reported £88.5 million (RM487m) move from Shakhtar Donetsk in January last year, signing an eight-and-a-half-year contract.

It was reported in April that he had signed a further one-year extension to that deal. - The Independent/Express Newspapers



Chelsea's Mykhailo Mudryk. - REUTERS/PICT

## Ferdinand shares suspicion on axed United duo

**RIO FERDINAND** has suggested that Ruben Amorim's decision to leave Marcus Rashford and Alejandro Garnacho out of the Manchester derby squad might have been due to something he "heard or saw something he was unhappy with" at training.

The new Manchester United head coach raised eyebrows on Sunday by excluding the two attackers from the squad for the crucial clash against Manchester City.

Despite the unexpected move, United clinched a 2-1 win, with Amad Diallo playing a pivotal role in the triumph.

Amorim's bold strategy has earned him praise for asserting his leadership, particularly before such a significant match.

On his *Rio Presents* podcast, the defender remarked: "This manager doesn't seem to be the type of guy that will let stuff slide."

"He seems to be a very honest and straightforward guy. We saw Erik ten Hag do this early, going against players."

"But in time, the consistency wasn't there across the board with other players. The squad then starts picking holes in that."

"I'd like to think it's different with

Amorim, he seems very direct, 'you're not playing - that's it and that's why'."

"I think in the training ground, he's instructed all of his staff to keep their eyes open about everything. How do these players interact with all members of staff? How are they when I'm not in the room? He seems like a man of detail."

"He wants a harmonious environment. A proper culture of respect. I think he's seen or heard a couple of things that he isn't quite happy with."

"There's something not related to football that I think has happened. They probably flippantly did not say hello to someone or have not been as warm to people."

"These little one-per-centers add up to building a culture to win. If you let these go, the culture to win takes even longer. Every single detail, I don't like that, nail it. Punctuality, respect for teammates, etc."

"I think something's gone on in the training ground, and I'm not privy to that information, but for him to talk about things not related to football about why players aren't in his squad that week, something's happened off the pitch. He's thought, 'that ain't for me'. And by the way, I love it." - Express Newspapers

**TOTO SPORTS TOTO RESULTS**  
**DRAW NO: 5898/2024 DATE: 18/12/2024 (WED)**  
**STM LOTTERY SDN. BHD.**  
 19691000990 (84202)

**TOTO 4D PRIZE PAYMENTS GUARANTEED IN FULL**

**4D JACKPOT**  
 Jackpot 1 **RM 5,270,098.94**

1st Prize	9247
2nd Prize	0388
3rd Prize	8107

Special	6622 4876	5553 3085	0927 3143	2954 2178	7965 8009
Consolation	2793 2664	5037 0219	3072 9306	1636 6787	3967 7865

**4D JACKPOT**  
 Jackpot 1 **RM 5,270,098.94**

9247 0388	0388 9247
9247 8107	8107 9247
0388 8107	8107 0388

Jackpot 2 **RM 153,929.49**  
 Winning combination of any 1 of Top 3 & any 1 of Special prizes.

**4D Zodiac**

1st Prize	9247	+	
2nd Prize	0388	+	
3rd Prize	8107	+	OX
4th Prize	Special Prize	+	
5th Prize	Consolation Prize	+	
6th Prize	Any 4D drawn number	+	

**TOTO 5D & 6D PRIZE PAYMENTS GUARANTEED IN FULL**

**5D**  
 1ST 1 5 3 8 8  
 2ND 4 0 4 3 8  
 3RD 7 3 2 8 7  
 4TH 5 3 8 8  
 5TH 3 8 8  
 6TH 8 8

**6D**  
 1ST 1 1 8 7 7 5  
 2ND 1 1 8 7 7 or 1 8 7 7 5  
 3RD 1 1 8 7 or 8 7 7 5  
 4TH 1 1 8 or 7 7 5  
 5TH 1 1 or 7 5

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 DRAW DATE: 18/12/24 (Wed) Draw/No: 5845/24 Venue: WISMA GENTING, KL

**1-3D SUPER 1-3D**

1st Prize	3977
2nd Prize	8558
3rd Prize	0250

Starters	0937 8716	2577 0744
Consolation	1472 4250	9755 4199
	1101 1853	2673 0011
	2149 5530	4030 9338
	5199 6654	1685 5232

**1-3D**

Jackpot 1	RM4,121,390.30
3977 + 8558	8558 + 3977
3977 + 0250	0250 + 3977
8558 + 0250	0250 + 8558

Jackpot 2 **RM371,490.30**  
 Winning pair matches any 1 of Top 3 & any 1 of 10 Starter Prizes.

**3-3D**

1st Prize	Bonus	1st Prize Bonus
923 977 +	DOG	RM1,011,146.80
2nd Prize	Bonus	2nd Prize Bonus
278 558 +	RAT	RM1,075,532.30
3rd Prize	Bonus	3rd Prize Bonus
140 250 +	MONKEY	RM1,616,188.40

Starters	270 937	288 716	822 577	900 744
Consolation	561 472	974 250	759 755	424 199
	471 101	091 853	842 673	160 011
	692 149	095 530	794 030	449 338
	765 199	896 654	311 685	125 232

**3D**

1st Prize	977
2nd Prize	558
3rd Prize	250

**3D**

Jackpot	RM816,358.60
977 + 558 + 250	558 + 250 + 977
977 + 250 + 558	250 + 977 + 558
558 + 977 + 250	250 + 558 + 977

Winning combination matches the Top 3 Prizes in any order.

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RESULTS & STANDINGS

**MALAYSIA SUPER LEAGUE:** Sri Pahang 1 Johor Darul Ta'zim 3, Perak 1 Selangor 2.

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Johor DT	16	15	1	0	59	7	46
Selangor	16	11	2	3	29	13	35
Sabah	15	9	2	4	32	21	29
Terengganu	15	6	6	3	20	16	24
Kuching City	14	4	6	4	19	20	18
Perak	16	5	3	8	22	28	18
PDRM	15	4	6	5	15	21	18
Kuala Lumpur	15	7	2	6	25	21	17
Sri Pahang	14	3	6	5	17	22	15
Penang	15	3	5	7	15	25	14
Kedah	15	4	5	6	15	27	14
Kelantan	15	2	1	12	12	37	7
N.Sembilan	15	1	3	11	14	36	6

**Note:** Kedah Darul Aman docked three points over salary arrears issues; KL docked six points.

**ITALIAN CUP (last 16):** Juventus 4 (Vlahovic 44, Koopmeiners 53, Conceicao 80, Gonzalez 89) Cagliari 0.

SHORTS

MNCF given ultimatum on Azizulhasni's future

THE National Sports Council (NSC) has given the Malaysian National Cycling Federation (MNCF) until Dec 31 to confirm track cycling ace Datuk Mohd Azizulhasni Awang's participation in the Podium Programme next year.

NSC deputy director-general (Sports Development) Jefri Ngadirin said if the 2020 Tokyo Olympics silver medalist agrees to remain in the Podium Programme, he (Azizulhasni) must comply with the key performance indicator (KPI) set by the NSC, including qualifying for the UCI Track World Championships in Santiago, Chile in October 2025.

"Just like other athletes, we have set a KPI for him (Azizulhasni) to achieve as well. So, if he agrees to the stipulated KPI and agrees to the terms, we will offer him a place in the Podium Programme.

"We will present the offer (for the Podium Programme) on Jan 1, so for now we will ask the association to contact him," he told a media conference after officiating the Jelajah Juara Esports Malaysia 2024 here today.

Yesterday, media outlets reported that the MNCF and NSC had agreed to retain Mohd Azizulhasni in next year's Podium Programme but on condition that the 36-year-old rider qualifies for the 2025 UCI Track World Championships.

Johor regent briefs Fifa boss on M'sian team 'project'

THE Regent of Johor, Tunku Mahkota Ismail held a meeting with International Football Federation (Fifa) president Gianni Infantino yesterday (Dec 17).

The meeting was held to give a briefing regarding the Malaysian national team's 'project'.

Based on a post uploaded to Tunku Mahkota Ismail's Facebook page, the briefing was regarding a project initiated by Tunku Mahkota Ismail which has received the support of the Malaysian government.

"Infantino also expressed confidence in the national initiative, which is spearheaded by the Regent of Johor, and agreed to provide support to Malaysia in terms of research, infrastructure and development.

"Allah blesses the Sultan," added the post.

# Crucial game against S'pore

THE national football squad face a crucial "do-or-die" match against Singapore in their final Group A game to secure a spot in the semifinals of the 2024 Asean Cup at the National Stadium in Bukit Jalil tomorrow (9pm local time).

In Tuesday's Group A action, Thailand staged a remarkable comeback to defeat Singapore 4-2, taking the War Elephants to the top of the table with nine points, while Singapore remain second with six points.

Cambodia are third, tied on points with Malaysia in fourth, while Timor Leste are at the bottom without a single point.

Should Malaysia secure a win against Singapore in their final group match, Pau Marti Vicente's men

## Malaysia face Lions in 'do-or-die' Asean Cup match

will clinch three vital points, bringing their total to seven and securing the runners-up spot in Group A.

On paper, Thailand are expected to have little difficulty dispatching Cambodia when they host them at the Rajamangala National Stadium in their final group match.

If Thailand defeat Cambodia, they will finish as Group A winners with 12 points.

In Tuesday's match, Singapore started strongly, opening the scoring in the 12th minute with a powerful strike from Muhammad Shawal Anuar following a pass from Mohamad Izwan Mahbud.

Tsutomu Ogura's men doubled their lead in the

34th minute through Faris Ramli, assisted by Hami Syahin.

However, the lead was short-lived as the visitors clawed back with Patrik Gustavsson scoring Thailand's first goal.

In the second half, Thailand intensified their attacks, equalising in the 52nd minute with a header by Suphanat Mueanta, assisted by Yodsangwal.

Thailand continued their offensive, sealing the game with two injury-time goals by Peeradon Chamratsamee and Teerasak Poeiphimai, ending the match with a 4-2 victory over Singapore. - Bernama



JDT's Oscar Pasero (left) in action with Sri Pahang players on Tuesday. - BERNAMAPIC

## JDT win, Fandi disappointed

SRI PAHANG FC coach Fandi Ahmad did not mince his words when he questioned the quality of refereeing, which he described as biased, during his team's 3-1 Super League loss to Johor Darul Ta'zim (JDT) at the Sultan Ibrahim Stadium on Tuesday.

He was particularly miffed with the three yellow cards shown to his players while none of the JDT players were booked despite the tackles made by both teams.

"I am being frank. I am most displeased with the referee. These days football is becoming like rugby.

"Kpah Sean Sherman was tackled three to four times in the first half but nothing (no yellow card) was given, not even a freekick.

"But (our players) were shown three yellow cards, JDT had none. That's what my team and I are most displeased with and this is unfair.

"Yes, we know they are a good team but (refereeing) must be fair," he told the post-match press conference after the match last night.

He also questioned the decisions made, including the penalty given after a Video Assistant Referee (VAR) check, saying it (the check) should give a clear picture of whether or not a foul was committed.

"How can (it be a) penalty when Arif Aiman lost the ball, (after) my player made a clean tackle and he (Arif Aiman) went tumbling? Play was allowed to continue for three minutes before it was stopped (for VAR check).

"This is bad for football. Win or lose is part of the game but we didn't stand a chance," he said.

Fandi, however, praised his men for giving their best and keeping JDT at bay in the first half. Meanwhile, JDT head coach Hector Bidoglio described the match as "challenging".

"In the first half, we were unable to capitalise on several scoring opportunities, but things changed in the second half.

"It was a very tough match. We need to work on our weaknesses to avoid making the same mistakes," he said. - Bernama

## Perak coach laments team's complacency in Selangor defeat

PERAK FC coach Yusri Che Lah is disappointed with his players for allowing Selangor FC to beat them 2-1 at their home ground in the Super League at the Manjung Municipal Council Stadium on Tuesday.

Yusri hopes his men will learn from the defeat and that complacency and silly mistakes will prove costly to the team.

"When we are complacent, it allows our opponents to capitalise on their chances and they will punish us.

"We played well last night but were denied victory, let alone a share of the spoils," he told the post-match press conference last night.

What irked Yusri the most was that both the Selangor goals came from quick counterattacks.

"We started well and even put Selangor under pressure but we paid the price for our complacency and they drew first blood (through Alvin Fortes in the 41st minute).

"We tried to bounce back after the break but,

again, complacency and mistakes allowed them to punish us a second time (with Fortes netting in the 71st minute).

Being two goals down, we tried to chase the game but it was too little, too late (despite Wan Zack Haikal pulling a goal back in the 89th minute)," he said.

Yusri urged his men to put aside the home defeat and get ready for their Malaysia Cup quarterfinal, return-leg tie against Sri Pahang FC in Temerloh on Sunday (Dec 22).

Meanwhile, Selangor FC coach Katsuhito Kinoshi was gushing with pride after watching his men snatch all three points.

"I am satisfied with my team's performance... not just the starting 11 but also the substitutes.

"All of them played their part and that was the key to our success. Most importantly, we need to continue to believe in ourselves and our abilities... otherwise, it will be difficult to succeed," he said. - Bernama

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GROUP 2	98671 OR 86711
GROUP 3	9867 OR 6711
GROUP 4	986 OR 711
GROUP 5	98 OR 11
	OR 67
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SCAN ME

# Time to move on

Rashford prepared to leave Old Trafford after spending two decades at United

BY LAWRENCE OSTLERE

**M**ARCUS RASHFORD has admitted he is ready to leave Manchester United and begin a "new challenge."

Rashford was left out of the squad for Sunday's Manchester derby, along with winger Alejandro Garnacho, with manager Ruben Amorim later explaining: "It's important for me the performance in training, the performance in game, the way you dress, the way you eat, the way you engage with the teammates, the way you push your teammates."

The 27-year-old has been at United since he was seven years old, and broke into the first team aged 18 under then manager Louis van Gaal. But after nearly a decade in the first team, Rashford has said it is time to move on.

"For me, personally, I think I'm ready for a new challenge and the next steps," he told the journalist Henry Winter. "When I leave it's going to be 'no hard feelings'."

"You're not going to have any negative comments from me about Manchester United. That's me as a person."

He added: "If I know that a situation is already bad I'm not going to make it worse. I've seen how other players have left in the past and I don't want to be that person. When I leave I'll make a statement and it will be from me."

Amorim's ruthless decision to leave out two of his star names was vindicated as United pulled off a rare win over City at the Etihad Stadium, thanks to two late goals.

Afterwards the manager extended an olive branch to Rashford and Garnacho, saying: "If they train well with the talent they have, we will be so much better with both of them. But they

have to work hard."

Amorim added that both players had been in training on the morning of Sunday's derby game. "Today, they train really hard, so it's a good thing."

But speaking during a visit to his former primary school, Rashford admitted it looked like the end of the road at Old Trafford.

"It's disheartening to be left out of a derby but it's happened, we won the game so let's move on."

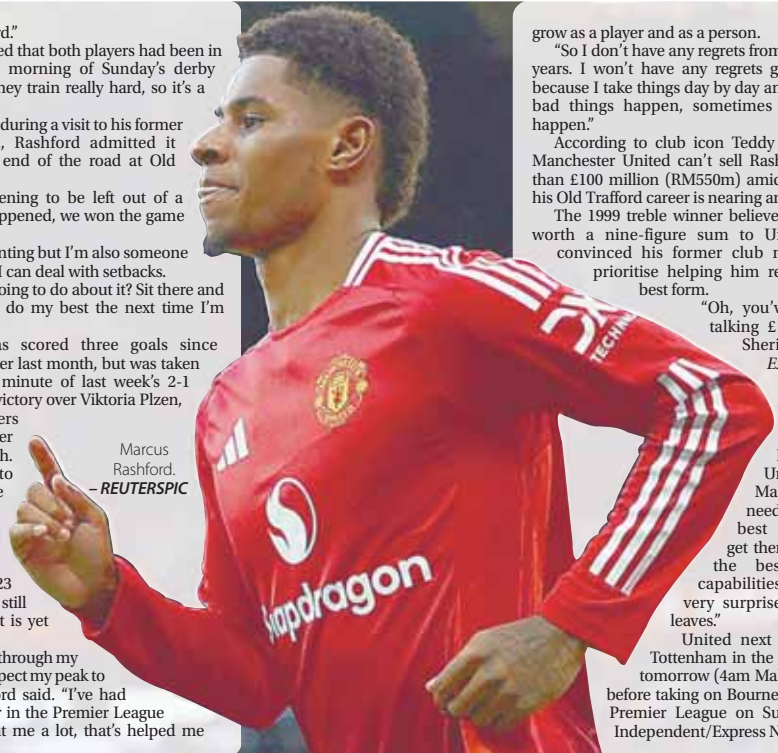
"It's disappointing but I'm also someone as I've got older I can deal with setbacks."

"What am I going to do about it? Sit there and cry about it. Or do my best the next time I'm available."

Rashford has scored three goals since Amorim took over last month, but was taken off in the 56th minute of last week's 2-1 Europa League victory over Viktoria Plzen, with supporters booing the striker as he left the pitch.

He has yet to rediscover the form that saw him score 30 goals across all competitions in the 2022-23 season, but he still believes the best is yet to come.

"I'm halfway through my career. I don't expect my peak to be now," Rashford said. "I've had nine years so far in the Premier League and that's taught me a lot, that's helped me



Marcus Rashford. - REUTERS/SPIC

grow as a player and as a person.

"So I don't have any regrets from the last nine years. I won't have any regrets going forward because I take things day by day and sometimes bad things happen, sometimes good things happen."

According to club icon Teddy Sheringham, Manchester United can't sell Rashford for less than £100 million (RM550m) amid reports that his Old Trafford career is nearing an end.

The 1999 treble winner believes Rashford is worth a nine-figure sum to United but is convinced his former club must instead prioritise helping him rediscover his best form.

"Oh, you've got to be talking £100 million," Sheringham told *Express Sport*.

"I'm very surprised that there's talk about him leaving United. I think Man United need to keep their best players and get them working to the best of their capabilities. So I'd be very surprised if Marcus leaves."

United next play against Tottenham in the Carabao Cup tomorrow (4am Malaysian time), before taking on Bournemouth in the Premier League on Sunday. - The Independent/Express Newspapers

**PGA duo come out tops**

Story on page 28

**Juve storm into quarters**

Story on page 29

**'I have not done anything wrong'**

Story on page 30