



Backlash against 'publish-or-perish' policy

Research papers authored by Malaysian academics under the spotlight of retraction watch, says professor.

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Death knell for 'Ali Baba' businesses

Trade groups back proposed law to stop locals from renting their licences and premises to foreign nationals.

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Malaysia risks losing 2.3m ha of forests

Stop extensive deforestation and practice of replacing lost trees with timber plantations, says climate watchdog

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Miros acts to ensure safety of bikers

Institute actively addresses poor lighting, landscape management and road pavement maintenance based on public complaints: DG

Poor maintenance and potholes were the main reasons cited by motorcyclists for not using dedicated lanes. – ADIB RAWI YAHYA/THE SUN



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'Govt consistent in championing Palestinian cause'

KUALA LUMPUR: The Malaysian government under Prime Minister Datuk Seri Anwar Ibrahim's leadership has been consistent in championing the Palestinian cause and condemning the Israeli regime's brutality, said Amanah Wanita chief Datuk Aiman Athirah Sabu.

She said the nation's strong support for the Palestinian struggle included blocking and disallowing the Israeli-based company ZIM from calling at any port in the country.

She added that Malaysia had also raised the Palestinian issue in the presence of US president Joe Biden and other Asia Pacific Economic Cooperation (Apec) leaders at the Apec economic leaders' week informal dialogue and working lunch in San Francisco recently.

"I am certain, and believe that the country's leadership is ensuring that Islamic countries play their respective roles to help provide aid to Gaza," said Aiman Athirah, who is also deputy local government development minister, at the Palestine Solidarity picket on Saturday.

Meanwhile, checks revealed that eight tents had been set up near the US embassy on the fifth day of the picket, with various activities being held such as cultural exhibitions, poetry recitals and talks on the Palestinian issue.

The six-day picket that began on Dec 26 is an initiative by Malaysians concerned with the ongoing crisis in Gaza. It brings together 48 NGOs comprising community organisations, youth and student associations as well as political groups.

They include the Malaysian Islamic Consultative Council, Sejagat, Viva Palestina Malaysia, Yayasan Al Quds Malaysia, Suara Rakyat Malaysia and Malaysian Women's Coalition for Al-Quds and Palestine.

Picket participants are demanding a stop to the killing of Palestinians and an immediate ceasefire.

According to international news reports, at least 20,000 Palestinians, including children, have been killed in Gaza since the latest Israel-Palestinian war began on Oct 7. – Bernama

Loke reiterates commitment to public transport

KUALA LUMPUR: Transport Minister Anthony Loke uploaded a short video on Instagram about his ministry's continued commitment to strengthen public transport.

The two-minute video showed various initiatives by the ministry to raise the level of public transport services, including the FlySiswa programme that has benefited 50,000 students, the My50 travel pass, and the Komuter Utara service from Ipoh to Penang.

The video also mentioned the additional trains plying from Kedah, the ferry service in Penang and the increase in frequency of LRT trains to every three minutes during peak periods.

The video's captions said the ministry's efforts are to ensure that the national transport service network is well connected, bringing meaningful changes to people's lives.

"While not every aspect of the ministry's implementation (of initiatives) is perfect, we will continue to strive to deliver better services," said Loke. – Bernama

Move to stamp out 'Ali Baba' business practices

➤ Act being drawn up to stop local businessmen from renting licences, premises to foreign nationals, says minister

BY **QALIF ZUHAIK**
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PETALING JAYA: The government is on the right path to fostering fair and equal business opportunities with the proposed anti-Ali Baba Act, as it will target Malaysians involved in the illegal practice of subletting licences to foreign workers, said Economy Minister Rafizi Ramli.

He announced on X that his ministry is drawing up the Act to stop local businessmen from "renting" their business licences and premises to foreign nationals.

Malaysian Employers Federation president Datuk Dr Syed Hussain Syed Husman said any policy has its pros and cons, but it is time for an Act that provides better opportunities for local businesses.

"It will benefit the majority if the practice of leasing licences and premises to foreigners illegally is prevented."

He said the Act would likely define legal and illegal businesses.

"It is not about restricting legal foreign business ownership, as Malaysia has already removed restrictions on foreign ownership of businesses. Hence the Act is about curbing foreign nationals from working through illegal means."

Syed Hussain said reducing reliance on foreign labour has to be done in stages, and for the Act to work businesses need to be given sufficient time to adjust their manpower requirements.

"Once the Act is successful in reducing foreign labour, businesses can upskill and reskill their employees. This means the government needs to assist micro, small and medium enterprises (MSME) to digitalise, mechanise and automate their processes to streamline local business operations."

Syed Hussain said the government has taken the right step by mainstreaming Technical and Vocational Education and Training (TVET).

"The private sector is taking the lead to ensure that the TVET curriculum meets industry requirements, especially through the National Dual Training System Division and

Academy In Industry programmes.

"The Higher Education Ministry and private sector have also drawn up a curriculum to reduce the skills gap so that graduates are better prepared to work in the private sector."

He said this would foster better localisation of industries, particularly MSME, to compete in the Malaysian market.

Federal Territories Malay Hawkers and Small Traders Association president Datuk Mohamad Abdullah lauded the proposed Act.

"The Act will tilt the focus on individuals who dedicate themselves to making a living through business. It is unfair that local traders and hawkers are left on the sidelines, waiting for opportunities while foreigners take centre stage."

He urged local authorities and city councils to be more strict in granting licences after the Act comes into force.

"Since the Ali Baba practice has been here for a long time, it has raised concerns among local businesses."

On Dec 21, over 1,000 enforcement personnel conducted a raid in Jalan Silang, a known gathering point for foreign workers in the city. The raid was aimed at curbing illegal activities and verifying the legitimacy of businesses owned by foreigners or those that employed them.



CONSOLING PRESENCE ... Health Minister Datuk Seri Dr Dzulkefly Ahmad meeting a boy who was injured in a road crash, during his visit to the Sekolah Kebangsaan Jeli 1 flood relief centre in Jeli, Kelantan yesterday. – BERNAMAPIC

More Malaysian aid for Gaza

KUALA LUMPUR: Several NGOs in the country are committed to continuing humanitarian aid missions to Palestine next year, said *Ops Ihsan* secretariat chairman Jismi Johari.

He said three humanitarian aid missions to Palestine had been carried out through *Ops Ihsan*, namely on Nov 3, Nov 10 and Dec 19, with the value of goods provided, including transport costs, amounting to about RM14 million.

"Although we have distributed aid such as food, medicine and personal care items, it is still not enough to meet the needs of the people in Gaza."

"Currently, more than 1.7 million people there are homeless and living as refugees. So, they need tents to be used as shelter and we hope to provide such assistance."

Muslim Care Malaysia president Zulkifli Wahijan said the organisation had distributed goods worth RM3.5 million to Palestine since Oct 10.

He said the items included dry food such as biscuits, rice, flour and beans, blankets and sweaters as well as solar panels to generate energy for various uses.

Zulkifli said the organisation also planned to rebuild infrastructure such as mosques, schools and business centres that had been destroyed by the Israeli military. – Bernama

16 Terengganu exam centres facing flood threat

PERMAISURI: The Education Ministry has identified 16 examination centres in Terengganu that are at risk of being hit by the fourth wave of floods, said Deputy Education Director-General (Professionalism Development Sector) Shafruddin Ali Hussin.

He said 224 students who will be sitting for the SPM examination in the districts of Hulu Terengganu, Setiu, Dungun and Besut are expected to be affected.

He added that the Terengganu state

Education Department has made the necessary preparations, including relocating students to hostels or nearby schools to ensure that the examination which began yesterday could be held till March 7, as scheduled.

He was speaking after attending a post-flood clean-up operation at Sekolah Kebangsaan Sungai Las yesterday.

Shafruddin said the total loss incurred by schools affected by the floods in the state is estimated to be RM340,000, including damage

to furniture and equipment.

He said allocations to carry out repair works would be channelled to the affected schools soon.

He added that 53 schools in eight districts were affected by floods that hit Terengganu on Nov 20, and 79 schools were used as relief centres to accommodate evacuees.

He also said Terengganu has fully recovered from the third wave of floods that hit the state on Dec 23. – Bernama

Full support from Penang for Madani concept: CM

GEORGE TOWN: Penang must continue to lead, inspire and contribute to the well-being of all Malaysians based on Malaysia Madani values and principles, said Chief Minister Chow Kon Yeow.

He added that with the world changing rapidly, all efforts and objectives targeted by the federal government through the concept of Malaysia Madani will continue to be supported at the state level.

"The Penang government will continue to steer the state through careful planning and implementation to achieve the 'Penang 2030 Vision: A People-centric Smart and Green State

That Inspires the Nation' to revive the economic sector so that state development, in particular, and the country in general, can progress quickly," he said in a New Year message yesterday.

He emphasised that the success of development and economic recovery achieved so far is the result of the states and federal government constantly working together to ensure the implementation of projects or programmes that benefit the people.

He also said the state government was focusing on social development to improve the well-being and quality of life of Penangites,

with mega infrastructure projects such as the light rail transit, airport expansion and Silicon Island initiatives in the southern part of the island being given priority.

"The state government is confident the Silicon Island project will replicate the success of the Bayan Lepas Free Industrial Zone, which brought economic renewal to Penang over 50 years ago.

"It is undeniable that we need Silicon Island to further develop the industrial land in Bayan Lepas to ensure growth and increase in competitiveness of our leading electrical and electronic manufacturing sector," he said.

While admitting it might be impossible for all the mega projects to be completed before the end of his tenure as chief minister, he reiterated his commitment to initiating the projects for the well-being of the people in the future.

Chow also urged the people of Penang to maintain harmony, adding that the state government will do its part to continue ensuring the people live in prosperity and unity.

"With this, I invite all Penangites to welcome the arrival of 2024 in the spirit of love, unity, tolerance and joy." – Bernama

Academics under spotlight

➤ Analysis reveals retraction of Malaysian research papers three times higher than average rate

BY JOSHUA PURUSHOTMAN
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KUALA LUMPUR: A professor has warned that local academics are in the spotlight after Malaysia was recently placed sixth in a list of countries with the highest rate of retractions for their research papers.

Universiti Malaya associate dean of Continuing Education Prof Dr Mohammad Tariqur Rahman said "one or another form of misconduct to boost their publications is the major cause of the retractions."

"Many Malaysian academics are in shock after finding that we are in sixth position in the list of countries with the highest rate of retractions."

The analysis by academic research organisation Nature found that for every 10,000 Malaysian research papers published, 17.2 were retracted, which is about three times higher than the average rate for all countries analysed.

Mohammad Tariqur said while the figure may seem small to a layman, having that many retractions amounts to a major hiccup in academic circles.

The other countries on the list were Saudi Arabia with 30.6 retractions per 10,000 research papers published, Pakistan with 28.1, Russia had 24.9, China recorded 23.5, Egypt had 18.8, Iran with 16.7 and India had 15.2.

The articles were retracted over "concerns that the peer review process has been

compromised" and "systematic manipulation of the publication and peer-review process", Nature reported.

Mohammad Tariqur said: "Keeping aside any assumption of misconduct in (the authoring of) their papers, it is now clear that papers authored by Malaysian academics are under the spotlight of retraction watch."

He said in 2022, a paper was published in the journal *Accountability in Research*, that reported an analysis of authorship patterns of 94 academics from three research universities in Malaysia who produced 4,561 papers from 1990 to 2020.

"Using different years as cut-off periods, it was observed that the appearance of the academics as co-authors in their papers had steeply risen in 2006, 2007, and 2008.

"This period corresponds to the adoption of the 'publish or perish policy' by the Higher Education Ministry in Malaysia."

Mohammad Tariqur said the increased number of authors in the multi-author papers and the appearance of the selected academics as co-authors reflected the extent to which collaborative research was boosted.

"On the other hand, the sudden rise in the number of co-authored papers might imply that they might not have proper intellectual contributions in those papers where they are credited as co-authors.

"While the analysis does not say if the academics had to resort to one or another form of misconduct to boost their

publications, it shows the pressure that pushed them against the wall to prove their publication productivity beyond their previous trend."

Mohammad Tariqur said a sudden increase of three to four-fold publication productivity in a given period attests to a "probable lack of authenticity and reproducibility of the results in the published research".

He said there are a few probable consequences if Malaysia continues to remain under the spotlight and our academic papers are questioned.

"Firstly, no matter what positions Malaysian universities will have in the global university rankings, a parallel ranking on the highest rate of retractions will jeopardise the aspiration of making Malaysia a reliable higher education hub in the region.

"Secondly, if the list of retractions is brought down to the institutional level, which is most likely to happen shortly, then the affected institution and its academic staff will lose their reputation and recognition at the national level and global levels.

"And thirdly, the justification of a future appointment or promotion of individuals who might be identified with some of their papers being retracted might raise major concerns."

Mohammad Tariqur put the blame squarely on policymakers who forced the "publish or perish" policy on academicians and researchers "for driving them to prove their productivity, fake or otherwise".

"If policymakers in academia do not read the messages between the lines of retractions, which calls for a reversal of academic misconduct, it will be nearly impossible to overcome."

Free parking after 5pm only at selected lots

KUALA LUMPUR: Kuala Lumpur City Hall (DBKL) has clarified that not all car parks under its management are available for free parking after office hours.

In a statement, it said there are 11 licensed car jockey parking facilities in Kuala Lumpur.

"In relation to a complaint that on social media about parking touts in Bukit Bintang, investigations indicate that it involved an open car park next to a lane off Jalan Sultan Ismail.

"This car park is under the control of DBKL, and fees are applicable during office hours until 5pm. In addition, DBKL has contracted a private company to manage eight parking spaces as valet services after office hours."

DBKL clarified that the valet service operator had been directed to display signs about the valet services at their designated locations to inform the public about the service.

Earlier, an individual shared a video showing scratches on her car door, allegedly caused by a parking tout, due to her refusal to pay a RM15 parking fee.

Meanwhile, DBKL is seriously addressing the issue of parking tout syndicates in the federal capital. Since last year, a total of 75 unauthorised jockeys have been prosecuted under Section 50(3) and Section 119(2) of the Road Traffic Act 1987.

"The DBKL enforcement team will increase surveillance in parking tout concentrated areas, namely Bukit Bintang, Jalan Beremi and Jalan Walter Grenier to address the issue effectively.

"DBKL encourages the public to utilise public transport to minimise private vehicle use, particularly in the city centre, to alleviate traffic congestion and endorse DBKL's initiatives in reducing carbon emissions." – Bernama

Unity core of Sabah's strength: Hajiji

KOTA KINABALU: As long as Sabahans remain united, no malicious forces can destabilise the state, said Chief Minister Datuk Seri Hajiji Noor.

He added that he is committed to ensure Sabah remains united, prosperous and inclusive in the coming year.

"We are strong only when we are united. When we are united, we will be able to withstand any attempt to undermine stability, and to ensure development can proceed unhindered.

"Let us put politics aside and discard any divisiveness that will only pull us apart. We must forge forward into the new year with resolve, united in diversity and committed to doing good, in accordance with the mandate given to us by the rakyat," he said in his New Year message yesterday.

He added that with the support of the people, the state government has made good strides in progressing its development plan under the Hala Tuju Sabah Maju Jaya and it is staying on course to see it through.

Hajiji also said the recently passed state Budget, amounting to RM5.7 billion, was a testament to the state government's commitment to drive economic growth and development in Sabah. – Bernama



LITTLE CHAMPS ... A group of children putting their best foot forward during a pushbike race at Taman Eko Kajang in Kajang yesterday that featured multiple events involving more than 200 participants. – ADIB RAWI YAHYA/THESUN



Malaysia set to lose 2.3m hectares due to deforestation

▶ Timber plantations have surpassed oil palm as leading cause of environmental harm

BY RAVEEN AINGARAN
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PETALING JAYA: A climate watchdog has called on the government to halt extensive deforestation and its replacement with timber plantations.

RimbaWatch co-founder and director Adam Farhan warned Malaysia is set to lose 2.3 million hectares of its forests, which would reduce the nation's canopy from 55.3% to 47.4%.

"This is according to a study we conducted in March 2023. We initially performed a deforestation analysis by interpreting data from tree cover loss provided by Global Forest Watch (GFW)."

Adam said GFW, which is an international online platform that provides data and tools for monitoring forests, estimated Malaysia experienced deforestation to the extent of 349,244ha between 2017 and 2021.

He said RimbaWatch's "State of the Malaysian Rainforest 2023" study garnered positive feedback from the public and highlighted its relevance.

In the study, the predominant drive behind alarming deforestation figures, including the 2.3 million hectares marked for clearance in Sabah, Sarawak, Kelantan and Pahang, was to expand timber plantations.

"These plantations are only cultivated on previously cleared land, resulting in the repeated replanting of new trees within the same plantation footprint.

"The plantations predominantly target primary forests within forest reserves, converting them into single-species timber monocultures, which usually encompass rubber or acacia trees."

He also said while the environmental impact of oil palm cultivation has garnered significant attention, timber plantations have overshadowed oil palm as the leading cause of environmental degradation.

"Sarawak, Sabah, Pahang and Kelantan are at the forefront of states witnessing extensive clearance for timber plantations.

"If Malaysia fails in its commitment to maintain at least 50% of its land mass under forest and tree cover, in line with the Rio



Yong said the problem is compounded by entrenched dependence on natural commodities and resource extraction for economic development. — **BERNAMAPIC**

Earth Summit in 1992, the repercussions would extend far beyond mere ecological concerns."

Adam said beyond compromising vital carbon sinks, essential ecosystem services and causing local climatic instability, the shortfall would indicate a significant failure to uphold Malaysia's international commitments.

Universiti Malaya Institute of Biological Sciences senior lecturer Dr Yong Kien Thai said to counter the projected decline in Malaysia's forest cover, the government must transition from mere discussions to tangible actions.

"Key strategies that should be executed include expanding reforestation efforts beyond mere tree planting and launching initiatives like the 'Five Million Tree Programme'.

"The government should also promote wildlife habitat and genetic exchange, described by the Central Forest Spine programme, which is under the UN Development Programme."

Malaysia should prioritise the creation of more protected conservation areas, halt primary land mining and logging projects, and intensify forest patrols to curb illegal poaching, logging and mineral extraction.

Yong said Malaysia's rapid deforestation poses a direct threat to the loss of biological diversity and ecological network disturbance that would result in a reduction in vital ecosystem services.

"Over the long term, this jeopardises the intricate biodiversity distributed across various forest types and regions in Malaysia."

He said one of the country's most pressing challenges is its entrenched dependence on natural commodities and resource extraction for economic development.

"This reliance has fostered a mindset that economic progress can be achieved primarily through the exploitation and trade of its natural resources.

"To transition towards sustainable land use practices, Malaysia needs a fundamental shift in this perspective.

"Priorities include diversifying the economy, investing in sustainable technologies, strengthening environmental regulations, fostering conservation partnerships and promoting sustainability awareness among Malaysians."

Traders hold 'fire sale' to cover flood losses

PASIR MAS: Traders at the Rantau Panjang duty-free zone are auctioning goods that were affected by floodwaters at heavily discounted prices to cut losses.

The enterprising "fire sale" has made the Rantau Panjang town centre a lively market place as visitors came in droves.

Trader Samsiah Abdullah, 60, who sells women's garments, said she decided to auction some of the goods, hoping to cover losses and use the money to repair her flood-damaged house.

"It is actually a loss but if I keep the clothes, I cannot profit either. So, it is better to auction it at a lower price. The good thing is that people are willing to buy them since it is cheap. Even if I do not get my capital back, at least I could recover some losses."

Not all the goods sold cheaply are flood damaged. Samsiah said some of the clothes were in good condition.

"I only managed to move some of my items to a higher place. But I could not save everything because I had to rush back home as I was worried I would be stuck here if I do not get out quickly."

For home goods dealer Nuriha Muhammad, 37, she did not expect so many people to visit the duty-free zone and regarded it as a blessing since most traders experienced fewer customers due to the floods.

"But luckily, many buyers came. There were also my followers on TikTok who came from far away, some from as far as Malacca and Terengganu to help us out here."

A sportswear dealer, who wanted be known only as Ruby, said the floods gave her a chance to be charitable by selling sportswear at a price of RM50 for four items.

"Usually I sell them at RM35 per item. But I know there are many in need, so I intend to donate, although most of the items were not even affected (damaged) by floodwaters." — Bernama

Hitch to efforts to repair severed fibre optic cables

KUANTAN: Transport and safety aspects were among the challenges faced in repairing severed fibre optic cables due to a landslide, which caused disruption of communication services in Orang Asli settlements, namely Pos Lemoi and Pos Telimau, in Cameron Highlands.

Pos Lemoi and Pos Telimau are located about 20km from Ringlet town.

State Communications and Multimedia Youth, Sports and NGOs committee chairman Fadzli Mohamad Kamal said repair work could not be carried out yesterday morning due to blocked access to the location.

"The main challenge is the use of lorries or four-wheel drive vehicles to carry new fibre cables and related equipment for connection work is quite difficult due to piles of rubble and mud.

"As of yesterday evening, works to repair the road and remove the piles of soil were still being carried out by the Cameron Highlands Public Works Department." — Bernama

Landslides at Orang Asli villages cause internet outage

GUA MUSANG: Landslides at several villages in Pos Balar have resulted in Orang Asli residents not being able to use internet facilities for the past five days.

They claimed the internet service was interrupted as the roads were inaccessible to vendors supplying diesel, that is needed to turn on a generator that supplies power to a telephone substation in the settlement.

Pos Balar Orang Asli Development and Safety Committee chairman Hanan Anjang said the situation has resulted in residents being unable to contact other communities to report on their progress in the settlement.

"Three villagers and I had to go to Bukit Kepong in Kampung Barung, about 2km away, just to get an internet connection because the telephone substation stopped functioning after

it ran out of diesel five days ago.

"Along the way, we had to pass areas landslides had occurred. We hope the internet connection issue can be resolved as soon as possible as we are afraid that an emergency may arise at night."

The Malaysian Communications and Multimedia Commission of Kelantan said they had taken note of the complaint and would carry out further investigations.

In Kuala Krai, residents of Kampung Tualang and Kampung Batu Mengkebang have voiced concern over tilting electric poles in the villages.

Che Romah Sapain, 68, from Kampung Tualang said the tilting poles not only pose a risk to residents in the nearby area but also endanger the lives of road users.

"There are several electric poles near the house and road that appear to be tilting and look like they are about to fall.

"If Tenaga Nasional Bhd (TNB) does not promptly monitor and address the issue, it could pose a threat to the safety of the people in the surrounding area," she said.

Abdullah Deris, 65, from Kampung Hujung Tanjung urged TNB to consider relocating the poles and take necessary measures to ensure an electric cable near the river does not pose any safety issues to residents.

"There are also cables along the river that appear to be sagging, which is quite dangerous. If the water level rises and comes into contact with the cables, it poses a significant danger, especially for locals using boats for fishing." — Bernama

Number of flood evacuees dropping

KUALA LUMPUR: The number of flood evacuees in four states dropped to 6,778 at 29 temporary relief centres yesterday, compared with 9,690 at 37 centres earlier.

According to the National Disaster Management Agency Command Centre, evacuees in Kelantan dropped from 9,387 at 27 centres to 6,684 at 24 centres.

It added that 3,916 evacuees were housed at 10 centres in Pasir Mas, 2,278 at nine centres in Tumpat, 62 at three centres in Kuala Krai and 428 at two centres in Jeli.

In Terengganu, six individuals were still at one centre in Kuala Terengganu while two centres in Dungun have closed.

The number of evacuees in Segamat, Johor remained at 54 in two centres.

In Pahang, the number dropped from 131 in five centres to 34 at two centres in Maran.

It also said 87 individuals affected by landslides in Cameron Highlands were still housed at one centre in the district.

The report added that Sungai Golok in Pasir Mas and Tanah Merah, Sungai Arau in Perlis, Sungai Perak in Hulu Perak and Sungai Pulai in Johor Bahru were at a danger level.

Some 34 roads have closed due to flooding, damaged or collapsed bridges and landslides, including Jalan Jabi-Bukit Tempurung in Johor, Jalan Pengkalan Rakit-Batu Karang in Kelantan, Jalan Marang-Wakaf Tapai in Terengganu, Jalan Kuala Lumpur-Bentong in Pahang and Jalan Bukit Jugra in Selangor. – Bernama

Motorcyclist safety concerns raised

► Poor lighting, landscape management and road pavement maintenance addressed based on public complaints: Miros

■ BY **SIVANISVARRY MORHAN**
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PETALING JAYA: The Malaysian Institute of Road Safety Research (Miros) is committed to the safety of motorcyclists, said its director-general Dr Siti Zaharah Ishak.

She was commenting on concerns among motorcyclists after summonses were recently issued by the Road Transport Department for not complying with the use of motorcycle lanes.

Sureshkumar Perumal, 29, from Ampang, said such lanes were perilous and too

dangerous to be used.

"I commute about 40km to work daily. The major hazards many motorcyclists encounter stem from poorly maintained and pothole ridden lanes. As a result, we are forced to use car lanes, although doing so also has its dangers."

Sureshkumar said he avoids using motorcycle lanes, especially at night, due to his brother's encounter with a robber.

He said there is a need for immediate attention and improvements to guarantee the safety of motorcyclists and to rectify conditions that pose risks to riders.

According to the Malaysia Road Fatalities Index, motorcyclists formed 59% of total road crash casualties between 2010 and 2019.

"It reflects a dire need for comprehensive measures to address motorcycle safety on Malaysian roads, on which seven of 10 deaths involve motorcyclists," the report stated.

Siti Zaharah said Miros actively addresses poor lighting issues, landscape management and road pavement maintenance based on public complaints.

"The multifaceted approach, which encompasses inspections, assessments, collaborations, education and research, reflects

our commitment to creating safer roads."

She said Miros is collaborating with stakeholders to achieve a reduction of 50% in road traffic fatalities by 2030.

Miros Road Safety Engineering and Environment Research Centre director Dr Muhammad Marizwan Abdul Manan said a study affirmed the effectiveness of motorcycle lanes and data revealed a 74% decline in fatalities with a government benefit-to-cost ratio that is four times higher, adding that the institute plans to take measures and initiatives to address concerns.

"We urge road users to lodge complaints through official channels. Road safety inspections will then be conducted by Miros in affected areas. However, these inspections depend on budget allocations and manpower. Reports are then forwarded to the Public Works Department, Malaysian Highway Authority and local councils for action."

He also said Miros conducts star-rating assessments on selected high-risk roads, especially high-speed ones such as federal trunk roads and expressways.

"The Malaysian Road Safety Assessment Programme evaluates crash likelihood and severity for all road users, including motorcyclists.

"The safety levels are categorised on a one to five scale and it identifies high-impact countermeasure programmes for road authorities," he said, adding that Miros engages in various working committees with road authorities.

"With these collaborations, we can focus on proper maintenance of roads and installation of lights and address concerns raised by motorcyclists."



FRESH START ... Employees of a car wash cleaning a bus in preparation for schools reopening tomorrow. – **ADIB RAWI YAHYA/THESUN**

Man killed in shootout with cops

BUKIT MERTAJAM: A man involved in armed robberies, who had 16 criminal records, was killed in a shootout with police in Machang Bubok yesterday.

Penang police chief Datuk Khaw Kok Chin said a team from the Serious Crime Division noticed a driver behaving suspiciously in an SUV headed towards Sungai Lembu at about 12am.

"They instructed the driver to stop, but the man accelerated and fired several shots at them. Police returned fire, but the driver sped away. The team gave chase and the suspect's SUV skidded about 200m away."

He added that the driver then stepped out of the vehicle, continued shooting until he was hit by return fire and died at the scene.

Khaw said preliminary investigations revealed the 44-year-old suspect had been arrested for drug-related offences and was involved in several robbery cases in Penang, Selangor and Malacca.

He also said the vehicle registration number of the SUV was fake. – Bernama

Foreigner charged with murder

JOHOR BAHRU: An Indonesian man was charged in the Magistrate's Court yesterday with the murder of his older sister last week at a house in Skudai.

Said Afendi, 24, was charged with causing the death of Syarifah Ilawati, 42, at about 2am on Dec 24. The charge, framed under Section 302 of the Penal Code, carries the death penalty.

The accused nodded after the charge was read before Magistrate Nurkhalida Farhana Abu Bakar. No plea was recorded as murder cases are under the purview of the High Court.

The court fixed Feb 18 for mention and to obtain post-mortem and chemical reports.

DPP Siti Fatimah Mamu appeared for the prosecution, while the accused was not represented. – Bernama

Better understanding needed to address croc attacks

KOTA KINABALU: Resolving human-crocodile conflicts demands a deep understanding to create a mutually beneficial solution within the natural order, said Universiti Malaysia Sabah zoologist Prof Dr Abdul Hamid Ahmad.

He added that the presence of crocodiles is generally perceived to be detrimental to human interest and the effects of such incidents on both humans and crocodiles often lead to conflicts in public discussions within the scientific realm of wildlife management.

"We must realise that we are a society living in a country where crocodiles are a natural part of our environment. Hence, we must gain a better understanding of this issue."

Based on research conducted between 2005 and 2007 on crocodiles in Sungai Paitan, Sandakan, he found that residents, particularly those in Kampung Kebulu, consistently experienced crocodile attacks.

Abdul Hamid said there were no jetties at the time and villagers could only carry out daily routines, such as bathing and washing clothes while balanced on logs.

According to a Wildlife and National Parks Department report, Tuaran, Lahad Datu and Kinabatangan have a high occurrence of crocodile threats, particularly from the saltwater crocodile or *Crocodylus porosus* species.

Lahad Datu Civil Defence Force serviceman

Badrul Baba, 35, said even with a decade of experience, it is not easy for him to capture the aggressive and dangerous reptiles.

"I am grateful I have not experienced any untoward incidents during this period," Badrul said, adding that he had participated in operations to capture crocodiles weighing 500kg up to 1,200kg.

On Dec 4, 2020, it was reported that Azlan Arif Abdullah, 16, was rescued from a crocodile attack by six friends at 3.30pm in Sungai Kampung Mengkabong, Tuaran.

The 1.5m reptile attacked while he was in the company of a group of teenagers searching for clams at the river. – Bernama

Gems await visitors to Malacca

➤ River cruise, zoo and museum among star attractions for VMY 2024

MALACCA: No trip to Malacca would be complete without viewing the natural wonders of Sungai Rembau and Sungai Linggi in Masjid Tanah, Alor Gajah.

Stretching across 15km, they are among the many gems in the Visit Malacca Year 2024 (VMY 2024) campaign.

Known as the Paya Lebar Eco-Tourism Centre, the mangrove forest enclosed river is home to nearly 1,400 crocodiles as well as other wildlife such as monitor lizards and various bird species, offering a unique experience that differs from navigating the famous Malacca River.

State Works, Infrastructure, Public Facilities and Transport Committee chairman Datuk Hameed Mytheen Kunju Basheer said two boats, each with a 20-passenger capacity, provided by the Malacca River and Coastal Development Corporation for the Sungai Linggi Eco-Cruise, will allow visitors the opportunity to immerse in the breathtaking beauty of the mangrove forest.

He added that the boats, based at the Paya Lebar jetty, will operate on Fridays, Saturdays and Sundays and are available for charter on weekdays,

Bernama reported.

"The three-hour round-trip boat service offers visitors a captivating journey through the river, immersing them in the natural habitat of crocodiles, Lokan Park and the mesmerising beauty of the mangrove forest."

Hameed added that almost 100 fishing boats at four jetties in the area, namely Teluk Berembang, Paya Lebar, Tebing Urut and Ramuan China Kecil, which have been upgraded with an allocation of RM250,000, are also ready to serve tourists.

"On average, almost 30 boats will be rented from fishermen by visitors, either for fishing trips or to enjoy the natural beauty along Sungai Rembau in the Ayer Limau state constituency every week, and we anticipate this number to increase throughout VMY 2024," he said.

Meanwhile, Malacca River and Coastal Development Corporation CEO Datuk Murad Husin said some boats have been given a new look to provide a different experience to visitors along the historically significant route in Banda Hilir.

"To liven up VMY 2024, several



The river cruise will allow visitors the opportunity to immerse in the breathtaking beauty of the mangrove forest. - BERNAMAPIC

boats have been given a fresh look, featuring captivating images like Upin and Ipin characters, food products and corporate sponsor logos, departing from their previous blue paint. We believe this aesthetic change will attract visitors to explore and engage in the river cruise service.

Murad also said the 4.5km route, dubbed "The Venice of the East", will be operated by 33 crew members, including nine women, with the target of serving one million visitors through various interesting packages.

Among the promotions offered by the corporation is the VMY 2024

Family Package, incorporating four attractions - River Cruise, Malacca Zoo, Malacca Museum and the Taming Sari Tower.

The comprehensive package allows visitors to access various attractions with a single, affordable ticket.

New Astro channel free preview, limited complimentary access to five channels

ASTRO is ringing in the new year with a gift for all its customers - a free preview of its new channel, HITS NOW (CH702), accompanied by complimentary limited-time access to five additional channels: HBO Hits, HBO Family, Showcase, K-Plus and Moonbug.

The company said the exclusive offering is its way of expressing gratitude to its customers, as it transitions into 2024 together with them.

"Prepare to make lasting memories with your family, as HITS NOW will be available as a free preview to all customers from Jan 10 to Mar 31. This launch is just in time for you and your loved ones to witness A-list actors and groundbreaking creators make history during the live broadcast of the 75th Primetime Emmy Awards on Jan 16."

Astro said the channel will air acclaimed dramas, side-splitting comedies, exciting game shows and more, including *America's Got Talent: Fantasy Team*, *American Idol* and *Celebrity Family Feud*.

"From Jan 1 to Jan 31, all Astro customers can also enjoy the latest blockbusters on HBO Hits, laugh together with their loved ones at the comedic antics on HBO Family, embark on educational adventures offered on Moonbug, watch Korean favourites on K-Plus and for those with an eclectic taste, Showcase provides a mix of current hits and timeless classics."

➔ CH415 HBO Hits is where you "immerse yourself in round-the-clock blockbuster hits for movie enthusiasts. Tune in to experience the cinematic thrill with *Moonfall* and *The Lost City*."

➔ CH414 HBO Family: "Create lasting family memories with HBO Family, which offers a delightful and family-friendly viewing environment. Enjoy programmes like *The Lego Movie 2* and *Bee Movie* together."

➔ CH413 Showcase is curated for the Malaysian audience. It presents a mix of current and timeless favourites. "This New Year, dive into the magic of movies with

specials, blockbusters and family favourites like *Dolittle*, *Jurassic World* and *Jurassic World: Fallen Kingdom*."

➔ "CH396 K-Plus is your ultimate destination for Korean entertainment, featuring exclusive drama series, variety shows, movies and lifestyle programmes. Explore the best of Hallyu with *Between Him and Her* and *Perfect Marriage Revenge*, perfect for the entire family."

➔ CH618 Moonbug: "Delight in pre-school shows on Moonbug, including favourites like *Blippi* and *CoComelon*. Sing, laugh and learn

with your children in the wonderful world of Moonbug."

Celebrate meaningful family moments
"We are pleased to introduce our latest campaign revolving around the tagline *Masa Bersama Merapatkan Kita*, showcasing what it truly means to connect with our loved ones. In our continuous dedication to enhancing family bonds, we have launched this initiative to encourage our customers to create meaningful family time together with Astro, featuring Syafiq Kyle and Mimi Lana available

on our Astro Malaysia YouTube channel," said Astro.

"Come together to celebrate the essence of family with Astro's range of TV Packs, with 30%* off starting from only RM41.99 per month. Start your journey of shared experiences with Astro by visiting www.astro.com.my."

* The "30% off" applies for subscriptions with auto-debit signups only. Terms and conditions apply.

Asean ministers show concern over tensions in South China Sea

MANILA: Foreign ministers of Southeast Asia's regional bloc Asean on Saturday expressed their concern over growing tensions in the South China Sea which they said could threaten regional peace and urged for peaceful dialogue among parties.

"We closely follow with concern the recent developments in the South China Sea that may undermine peace, security, and stability in the region," the bloc's top diplomats said in a

statement.

The statement came as China and the Philippines have traded accusations in recent months over a series of maritime run-ins and as Manila cited the need to change its approach since diplomatic efforts were headed in a "poor direction".

China has described the accusations as "purely false hype" and said it will not turn a blind eye to repeated "provocations and

harassment" by the Philippines.

Asean foreign ministers also reaffirmed the need to "exercise self-restraint in the conduct of activities that would complicate or escalate disputes".

"We reiterate the importance of peaceful dialogue that contributes constructively to the promotion of regional stability and cooperation in the maritime domain."

Asean and China have worked

towards creating a code of conduct in the South China Sea, a plan dating back to 2002.

But progress has been slow despite commitment by all parties to advance and speed up the process.

Talks on the components of the code have yet to start amid concerns over China's willingness to commit to a binding set of rules consistent with international law.

China claims most of the South

China Sea through a "nine-dash-line" that loops as far as 1,500km south of its mainland, cutting into the exclusive economic zones of Brunei, Indonesia, Malaysia, the Philippines and Vietnam.

China on Friday named former navy chief Dong Jun as its new defence minister.

He previously served as vice-commander in a command which operates in the South China Sea. – Reuters

'Taiwan president frontrunner a destroyer of peace'

➤ Candidate promotes separatism and is 'criminal mastermind' in obstructing exchanges across the strait, says China

BEIJING: China's government called the frontrunner for Taiwan's next president "confrontational" and a destroyer of peace after he spoke at a presidential debate and said the island's sovereignty and independence belong to its people.

The Jan 13 presidential and parliamentary elections are happening at a time of fraught relations between Beijing and Taipei.

China has been ramping up military pressure to assert its sovereignty claims over democratically-governed Taiwan.

It has taken particular exception to current vice-president Lai Ching-te, the presidential candidate for Taiwan's ruling Democratic Party (DPP) and leading in opinion polls by varying margins, saying he is a dangerous separatist.

Responding late on Saturday to Lai's comments at a live televised presidential debate earlier in the day, China's Taiwan Affairs Office said Lai had "exposed his true face



Lai greeting supporters at a campaign event on Saturday. – REUTERSPIC

as a stubborn 'worker for Taiwan independence' and destroyer of peace across the Taiwan Strait".

"His words were full of confrontational thinking," spokesperson Chen Binhua said in a statement.

Since 2016, when President Tsai Ing-wen took office, the DPP-led government has promoted separatism and is the "criminal mastermind" in obstructing exchanges across the strait and damaging the interests of Taiwan's people, Chen said.

"As the leading figure of the DPP

authorities and current DPP chairman, Lai Ching-te cannot escape his responsibility for this," he added.

Tsai and Lai have repeatedly offered talks with China, but have been rebuffed.

The DPP says only Taiwan's people can decide their future, as does Lai's main opponent in the election, Hou Yu-ih from Taiwan's largest opposition party the Kuomintang (KMT).

The KMT traditionally favours close ties with China but strongly denies being pro-Beijing. Hou has

also denounced Lai as an independence supporter.

The defeated Republic of China government fled to Taiwan in 1949 after losing a civil war with Mao Zedong's communists who founded the People's Republic of China. The Republic of China remains Taiwan's formal name.

Lai said on Saturday that the Republic of China and People's Republic of China "are not subordinate to each other", wording he and Tsai have used previously which has also riled Beijing. – Reuters

Australia thunderstorms raise risk of flash flooding

SYDNEY: Parts of Australia's east face severe thunderstorms for the second straight day on Sunday, the weather bureau warned, with heavy rains raising the risk of dangerous flash flooding.

In the last 24 hours, a wild weather system across the southeastern regions of Queensland and northern New South Wales has produced torrential rains, hailstones as big as 5cm and wind gusts close to 100km/h.

The rural town of Beerburum in Queensland's Sunshine Coast region picked up 127mm of rain, roughly a

month's average.

"Yet another day of severe thunderstorms is on the way, with the storm risk becoming more extensive throughout the first week of 2024," Miriam Bradbury, a forecaster at the Bureau of Meteorology, said in a video message on the social media platform X.

Some parts of Queensland will receive "locally intense rainfall which will lead to flash flooding," she said.

Federal Emergency Management Minister Murray Watt said the government will deploy up to 70

military veterans and retired emergency service workers across southeast Queensland to assist with the cleanup efforts from recent storms.

The latest storms follow severe weather on Dec 25 and 26 that killed 10 people and knocked out power for tens of thousands of properties across the east after Cyclone Jasper earlier this month caused widespread flooding and damage.

Climate change has amplified Australia's weather extremes in recent years, experts say. The El Nino weather phenomenon, which can

provoke wildfires, cyclones and prolonged drought, is also affecting the country during its current summer period.

Even as authorities prepare for thunderstorms in some parts, towns in Queensland's outback are sweltering with a heatwave across swathes of Australia's north.

Temperatures in one such town, Julia Creek, could touch 45°C yesterday, according to weather forecasts.

But the weather in the country's southeast is expected to be mild. – Reuters

BRIEFS

MILITARY RALLYS THOUSANDS TO SUPPORT ALLIANCE

NIAMEY: The prime ministers of Niger, Burkina Faso and Mali on Saturday affirmed their commitment to a shared future under an alliance that has seen the three junta-led countries distance themselves from the larger West African political bloc since their coups. The three neighbouring states are all ruled by military officers who have seized power in coups since 2020. This has put them at odds with the rest of the Economic Community of West African States, which is urging them to return to democratic rule. "From now on, we say, whether you're from Mali, Niger or Burkina, we have the same destiny. We're going in together," said Burkina Faso premier Appolinaire Joachim Kyelem de Tambela at a joint press conference in Niger's capital Niamey. "It is up to us to take control of our destiny," he said. A day earlier the three premiers appeared in front of a crowd of thousands celebrating the recent full withdrawal of French troops from Niger. – Reuters

NO SECOND TRIAL FOR CRYPTO FRAUDSTER

NEW YORK: A federal prosecutor in New York has decided against pursuing a second trial, this one over corruption and illegal political donations, against former crypto mogul Sam Bankman-Fried. The founder and CEO of the FTX cryptocurrency exchange platform, Bankman-Fried had been charged earlier with misappropriating billions of dollars of his clients' funds without their consent. He was found guilty in early November of seven counts including fraud, conspiracy and money laundering. Bankman-Fried, who is widely known as SBF, will face up to 110 years in prison when Judge Lewis Kaplan pronounces sentence on March 28. A second trial, including charges that federal prosecutor Damian Williams excluded from the earlier trial, had been scheduled to open on March 11. It was to have addressed counts including conspiracy to bribe foreign officials and conspiracy to commit bank fraud. Those charges were not included in the first trial because they were not part of an agreement by which Bahamian officials agreed to extradite Bankman-Fried in December 2022. – AFP

Nicaraguan priests targeted in latest wave of arrests

SAN JOSE: Nicaraguan authorities have arrested at least 12 priests since Dec 20, opposition figures and news reports said on Saturday.

Eleven of those arrested appear on a list given to AFP by lawyer Martha Molina, an expert on Nicaraguan Church affairs, exiled in the United States.

The newspaper *La Prensa* also said Jader Hernandez, pastor of a church in Managua, was detained.

Nicaragua is led by President Daniel Ortega, a former guerrilla leader who toppled a US-backed right-wing regime in the 1970s and ruled for more than a decade.

But since returning to power in 2007, Ortega has turned authoritarian as he exiled and jailed dissidents and rivals, quashed presidential term limits and seized control of all branches of the state.

He has also locked horns with the Catholic Church.

The Central American nation has shuttered more than 3,000 associations, NGOs and unions in the wake of 2018 protests against Ortega's government.

Hundreds of critics have been detained, including several people who sought to challenge Ortega ahead of presidential elections in 2021.

In October, the authorities shuttered the local office of the Franciscans, a Catholic order.

N. Korea to launch three more spy satellites

➤ US has long caused, worsened political instability on Korean peninsula and continues to pose military threat: Kim

SEOUL: North Korea plans to launch three more spy satellites in 2024 as part of efforts to ramp up its military, state media reported yesterday.

Pyongyang successfully put a spy satellite into orbit last month and has since claimed it was providing images of major US and South Korean military sites.

This year it also conducted a record-breaking number of weapons tests, including the launch this month of its most powerful intercontinental ballistic missile, blaming growing threats from the US.

"The task of launching three additional reconnaissance satellites in 2024 was declared" as

one of the key policy decisions for next year at a year-end party meeting, the official Korean Central News Agency said.

The five-day meeting, which ended on Saturday, was attended by North Korean leader Kim Jong Un.

"The US, which has long caused and worsened political instability on the Korean peninsula, continues to pose various types of military threat to our country even as the year is coming to an end," Kim said.

Seoul, Tokyo and Washington have ramped up defence cooperation in the face of growing missile and nuclear threats from Pyongyang this year and recently activated a system to share real-time data on North Korean missile launches.

Earlier this month, a US nuclear-powered submarine arrived in the South Korean port city of Busan and Washington flew its long-range bombers in drills with Seoul and Tokyo.

The North has previously described the deployment of Washington's strategic weapons – such as B-52 bombers – in joint drills on the Korean peninsula as the "intentional nuclear war provocative moves".

Kim ordered his country's Korean People's

Army to closely monitor the security situation on the peninsula and to "always respond with an overwhelming attitude".

"We must respond quickly to a possible nuclear crisis and continue to accelerate preparations to pacify the entire territory of South Korea by mobilising all physical means and forces, including nuclear force, in case of emergency," he said.

At the meeting, Kim said he would no longer seek reconciliation and reunification with South Korea, noting the "persisting uncontrollable crisis situation" which he said was triggered by Seoul and Washington.

Inter-Korean relations have deteriorated to a low point this year, with Pyongyang's spy satellite launch prompting Seoul to partially suspend a 2018 military agreement aimed at defusing tensions on the peninsula.

"I believe that it is a mistake that we should no longer make to consider the people who declare us as the 'main enemy' as a counterpart for reconciliation and unification," KCNA cited Kim as saying.

Kim ordered the drawing-up of measures for reorganising departments handling cross-border affairs, to "fundamentally shift the direction." – AFP

RUSSIA JAILS OVER 200 UKRAINIAN FIGHTERS

MELBOURNE: Russian courts have sentenced more than 200 Ukrainian fighters to prison terms since Moscow started its military operation in Ukraine, Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov said in an interview with the state RIA news agency published yesterday. "The courts of the Russian Federation have already sentenced more than 200 representatives of Ukrainian armed formations to long terms of imprisonment for committing atrocities," Lavrov told RIA. Both sides accuse each other of committing numerous atrocities in the war that Russia started with a full-scale invasion on Ukraine in February 2022. The United Nations has found continued evidence of war crimes and human rights violations committed by Russian authorities, including torture, rape and the deportation of children. In March, the International Criminal Court issued an arrest warrant for Russian President Vladimir Putin, alleging Moscow's forcible deportation of Ukrainian children is a war crime. "On our path to justice, the main result of the year is undoubtedly the arrest warrant issued by the International Criminal Court for Putin," Ukraine's Prosecutor-General Andriy Kostin said in a statement on Saturday. – Reuters

THREE MIGRANTS FOUND DEAD IN CANARY ISLANDS

MADRID: Three people were found dead in a canoe full of migrants that was rescued on Saturday off the Canary Islands, Spanish maritime rescue officials said. Lifeguards managed to take 15 survivors off the boat found late afternoon some 314km south of the island of El Hierro, a spokesperson for the Spanish emergency services told AFP. The survivors, some suffering from hunger and hypothermia, were transported by helicopter to El Hierro. The Canary Islands, Spanish islands off the north-west coast of Africa, are seeing the largest number of migrant arrivals since 2006.



UNUSUAL SIGHT

... Sea lions congregate obstructing the path of riot police during clashes with fishermen who are protesting against the government following the repeal of the existing fishing law and the non-payment of promised bonuses, in Valparaiso, Chile on Saturday.

– REUTERS/SPIC

Russia accuses Ukraine of 'terrorist attack'

MOSCOW: Russia accused Ukraine of carrying out a "terrorist attack" on Saturday on civilians in the city of Belgorod, including using controversial cluster munitions in strikes that killed at least 21 people and wounded dozens more.

Moscow said the attack, which followed waves of rocket and drone strikes by Russian forces on Ukrainian cities, would "not go unpunished".

In an emergency meeting at the UN Security Council demanded by Russia, envoy Vasiliy Nebenzya claimed Kyiv targeted a sports centre, an ice rink and a university.

"In order to increase the number of casualties of the terrorist attack they used cluster munitions," he said.

"(It was a) deliberate, indiscriminate attack

against a civilian target."

Both Russian President Vladimir Putin and Ukraine's President Volodymyr Zelensky are due to give New Year's Eve speeches overnight as the conflict between the two countries approaches its second anniversary in February.

The Belgorod attack came a day after Ukraine said a barrage of Russian missile strikes on several cities killed at least 40 people, wounding dozens more.

Fresh strikes on Saturday caused more casualties in the northeastern city of Kharkiv, Ukrainian officials said.

Belgorod lies about 30km from the border with Ukraine and has been repeatedly struck by what Moscow says is indiscriminate shelling by Kyiv's forces.

Unverified footage showed a street strewn

with debris and smoke billowing from burnt-out cars in the city's centre.

AFP was not able to immediately verify the circumstances of the strike, one of the deadliest on Russian soil since Moscow launched hostilities against Ukraine in February 2022.

Russia authorities said the death toll included at least three children, with 17 children among the 110 wounded.

Russia's foreign ministry, which has repeatedly denounced Western arms deliveries to Ukraine, accused the US and Britain of "inciting the Kyiv regime to commit terrorist actions". Ukrainian officials did not immediately comment.

In Ukraine, rescuers continued to search through rubble on Saturday, a day after Russian strikes killed at least 40 people.



Palestinians inspect the damage following Israeli strikes on the Zawayda area of the central Gaza Strip on Saturday. – AFP/IC

Israel seeks full control of Gaza-Egypt border

► Vows to demilitarise enclave, reversing 2005 withdrawal, placing Strip exclusively under Israeli control

CAIRO: Israel must take full control of the Gaza Strip border corridor with Egypt to ensure a “demilitarisation” of the area, Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu said on Saturday, as Israel’s military pushed deeper into central and southern Gaza.

Speaking at a press conference, Netanyahu said, “The Philadelphi Corridor or to put it more correctly, the southern closing point (of Gaza), must be in our hands. It must be shut. It is clear that any other arrangement would not ensure the demilitarisation that we seek.” He did not elaborate.

If accomplished, such a move would mark a *de facto* reversal of Israel’s 2005 withdrawal from Gaza, placing the enclave under exclusive Israeli control after years being run by the Palestinian militant group Hamas.

Netanyahu’s comments about the buffer zone came as Israeli military forces pressed ahead with an offensive that the prime

minister reiterated will last “for many more months”.

Fighting was focused in al-Bureij, Nuseirat, Maghazi and Khan Younis, according to residents, and was backed by intensive air strikes that filled hospitals with wounded Palestinians.

The bombardment has killed 165 people and wounded 250 others in Gaza over the past 24 hours, Palestinian health authorities said.

At Nasser Hospital in Khan Younis, the biggest medical facility in the south of the crowded territory, a Red Crescent video showed paramedics rushing a tiny, dust-covered baby into a ward as one shouted “there is breathing, there is breathing”.

Almost all Gaza’s 2.3 million residents have been forced from their homes by Israel’s 12-week assault.

The offensive has killed at least 21,672 Palestinians, according to health authorities

in Gaza, with more than 56,000 injured and thousands more feared dead under the rubble.

Israel said 172 of its military personnel have been killed in the Gaza fighting.

On Saturday, the armed wing of the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine said an Israeli soldier being held captive in Gaza by the group had been killed in an Israeli air strike that also wounded some of his captors.

A spokesperson for the group told Al Araby television the air strike followed a failed attempt by Israeli commandos to free the soldier.

The spokesperson gave no details of location or when the soldier had been taken captive. The Israeli military declined comment.

The conflict risks spreading across the region, drawing in Iran-aligned groups in Lebanon, Iraq, Syria and Yemen, that have exchanged fire with Israel and its US ally, or targeted merchant shipping.

Bombardment has smashed houses, apartment blocks, businesses and hospitals. – Reuters

Pro-Iran fighters killed in east Syria strikes

BEIRUT: Air strikes in eastern Syria, “likely” carried out by Israel, killed at least 23 pro-Iran fighters on Saturday, a war monitor said, reporting four more dead in the country’s north.

The Syrian Observatory for Human Rights said “23 pro-Iranian fighters”, including five Syrians, four from Lebanon’s Hezbollah group, six Iraqis and eight Iranians, were killed in at least nine pre-dawn air strikes near the Iraqi border.

It said the raids were “likely carried out by Israel”, after earlier indicating they were “likely American”.

A US military official, requesting anonymity, said the “US did not conduct any defensive strikes overnight”.

The Observatory said the strikes targeted military positions in Abu Kamal and its

surroundings in Deir Ezzor province, adding that a weapons shipment from Iraq and an ammunition warehouse were also hit.

Israel rarely comments on individual strikes targeting Syria, but it has repeatedly said it will not allow arch foe Iran, which backs President Bashar al-Assad’s government, to expand its presence there.

Also Saturday, the Observatory said “Israeli missiles targeted warehouses and bases of pro-Iran groups” near the airport in the main northern city of Aleppo, killing four foreign fighters.

Syrian state media, citing a military source, said “the Israeli enemy carried out an air attack targeting a number of points south of the city of Aleppo”.

During more than a decade of civil war in Syria, Israel has launched hundreds of air

strikes on its territory, primarily targeting Iran-backed forces, including Lebanese Hezbollah fighters as well as Syrian army positions.

But it has intensified attacks since its war with Hamas began on Oct 7.

Hezbollah announced on Saturday the death of four of its fighters, without saying when or where they were killed.

There have been regular cross-border exchanges of fire between Israel and Hezbollah, a Hamas ally, in southern Lebanon.

Early on Saturday in southern Syria’s Quneitra province, near the Israeli-occupied Golan Heights, “Israeli ground bombardment” killed two fighters from a Hezbollah-linked group, the Britain-based Observatory said.

The Israeli army said it carried out multiple strikes in Syria after two rockets fired from the country hit areas under its control. – AFP

US destroyer shoots down missiles

WASHINGTON: An American destroyer shot down two anti-ship ballistic missiles fired from Yemen on Saturday as it responded to a call for help from a container ship that was hit in a separate strike, the US military said.

The missiles were launched from territory controlled by the Iran-backed Huthi rebels, the US Central Command (Centcom) said in a social media post, describing it as the “23rd illegal attack by the Huthis on international shipping” since Nov 19.

The Huthis have repeatedly targeted vessels in the vital Red Sea shipping lane with strikes they say are in support of Palestinians in Gaza, where Israel is battling militant group Hamas.

Centcom said the *USS Gravelly* and *USS Laboon* – both destroyers – responded to a request for assistance from the *Maersk Hangzhou*, a Singapore-flagged, Denmark-owned and operated container ship that reported being struck by a missile while transiting the Red Sea.

While responding, the *Gravelly* shot down the missiles, which were fired “toward the ships”, it said.

The attacks by the Yemeni rebels, who have said they are targeting Israel and Israeli-linked vessels, are endangering a transit route that carries up to 12% of global trade, prompting the US to set up a multinational naval task force earlier this month to protect Red Sea shipping.

Israel has carried out a relentless campaign in Gaza since Oct 7 that has killed at least 21,672 people, also mostly civilians, according to the Hamas-run territory’s health ministry.

Those deaths have sparked widespread anger in the Middle East and provided an impetus for attacks by armed groups across the region that are opposed to Israel. – AFP

BRIEFS

ALBANIA EX-PM PLACED UNDER HOUSE ARREST

Tirana: Former Albanian prime minister and leader of the opposition Sali Berisha was placed under house arrest after he refused to appear before the judiciary police in connection with a corruption probe. The Special Court Against Corruption and Organised Crime indicted Berisha, 79, in October, suspecting him of “passive corruption of senior official”. The investigation is linked to alleged favouritism of his son-in-law in the privatisation of a state-owned sports complex while Berisha was prime minister in 2008. Berisha now heads the opposition Democratic Party. His lawyer, Genc Gjokutaj said the court also barred Berisha from communicating with people “other than the family that lives with him”. He said they would appeal the court’s decision, which they say was “serious violation of law and human rights”. Lawmakers on Thursday revoked Berisha’s legal immunity, paving the way for his possible arrest in connection with the investigation. – AFP

FRENCH COUPLE PLANNING TO ‘SACRIFICE’ SON

Madrid: Spanish authorities on Saturday said they had arrested a French couple earlier in December for planning to “sacrifice” in the Sahara their five-year-old son, who they believed to be “possessed”. The couple was arrested on Dec 21 in the southern Spanish port of Algeciras, as the family was about to board a ferry to the Moroccan city of Tangiers. The Guardia Civil police force said in a statement they had arrested a “couple of French origin” who “intended to murder their five-year-old son in the Sahara, believing him to be possessed”. Both parents had “psychiatric problems” and were the subject of a European arrest warrant for the abduction of a minor, the Guardia Civil added. The pair have been remanded in custody by a judge in Spain. The child is in good health and has been sent to a reception centre for minors in Spain before being returned to France. – AFP



THE COOLEST DRINK ON EARTH™



Master your emotions for empowerment

IN the intricate realm of the human mind, a profound revelation unfolds: "The mind is its place, and in itself can make a Heaven of Hell, a Hell of Heaven."

These hauntingly powerful words, penned by John Milton in his epic masterpiece *Paradise Lost*, invite us to explore the profound influence our mental landscapes wield over the complexities of our lives.

Within the delicate dance of thoughts and emotions, we discover a transformative power, an ability to shape our realities, turning the mundane into the extraordinary and the challenging into the triumphant.

Emotions, integral to the human experience, serve as the compass guiding our perceptions, decisions and interactions with the world.

Far from suppressing emotions, emotional control involves a conscious and adaptive response to them. Those who wield this skill navigate life's trials with resilience, fostering a positive outlook that enhances overall well-being.

In the digital era, where compliments and criticisms pour in torrents, our emotional responses hold unprecedented significance.

We often find ourselves responding impulsively to online interactions without contemplating



JUST DIFFERENT
BY BHAVANI KRISHNA IYER

the rippling effects, especially when faced with negativity or criticism.

A poignant illustration from a Netflix movie underscores the perils of unchecked emotions in the digital age.

A thoughtless social media post, capturing a moment of apparent irresponsibility, spirals into a viral storm, unravelling the life of a man caring for his ailing daughter.

The picture of the man lying across three seats on the Metro painted a thousand lies and muted the truth. The truth was that the man had not slept for 48 hours and had slept off on the train.

Adding to his woe was that he had a speech impairment, preventing him from explaining himself. The social media freak paid his dues in the end, which still did not justify his action.

The narrative emphasises the consequences of negative emotions running amok without room for clarification.

Beyond the digital realm, emotional control manifests profound benefits in interpersonal relationships. Those adept at regulating their emotions can navigate conflicts, communicate effectively and foster empathy.

Emotional intelligence, closely

intertwined with emotional control, plays a crucial role in understanding and managing emotions in oneself and others, fostering meaningful and satisfying connections.

Moreover, emotional control emerges as a guiding force in decision-making. If we were to stop and think for a moment before an action is performed, the world would be a better place to live in.

In a world where unchecked emotions can cloud judgements and lead to impulsive decisions, those with emotional mastery can evaluate situations rationally, consider alternatives and make choices aligned with long-term goals.

This heightened decision-making ability contributes to a sense of control and purpose, paving the way for a happier and more fulfilling life.

While many politicians are adept at keeping their emotions in check, some succumb to the challenges, revealing the delicate balance required in navigating the intricacies of public life.

In the fast-paced modern world, where stressors abound, emotional control serves as a powerful tool for managing stress and promoting mental well-being.

Individuals who can regulate their emotions approach difficulties with composure, reducing the negative impact of stress on their mental health and paving the way for a



In the digital era, where compliments and criticisms pour in torrents, our emotional responses hold unprecedented significance. – **REUTERSPIC**

more contented life.

Closely intertwined with emotional control is the cultivation of a positive outlook on life. Redirecting negative emotions and focusing on the positive aspects of situations can contribute to an optimistic mindset.

In turn, this positive mindset can enhance resilience in the face of adversity and foster gratitude for life's blessings, leading to an overall sense of joy, contentment and happiness.

In the delicate fusion between emotions and control, the human experience becomes a perfect picture

where mastery over one's emotional palette transforms the mundane into the extraordinary.

If you are looking for a resolution or two for the new year, take on the challenge of controlling your emotions, be it anger, joy, hatred, despair or whatever, and life will never be the same again.

When you know your emotions are in motion, take a break and ponder before you react.

Comments:

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Happy
NEW YEAR

2024

FROM ALL OF US AT

theSun

COMMENT

Independence of MACC vital

THIS article addresses the recent debates and differing viewpoints on the autonomy of the Malaysia Anti-Corruption Commission (MACC).

There is a growing consensus on the necessity of significant reforms within the MACC. These reforms are crucial to ensure its absolute independence, allowing it to function without political interference and maintaining its vital role in combatting corruption in Malaysia.

1. Constitutionally mandated commission

A new section should be added to the Federal Constitution, which would establish a constitutionally backed MACC to give the commission sufficient stability and power to perform its duty.

The new provision can be similar to Article 113 of the Federal Constitution, which delineates the functions, powers and objectives of the Election Commission. This ensures a unified policy framework for the MACC's responsibilities.

A suggested caveat to this proposal is that the appointed chief commissioner should not be affiliated with any political party or facing ongoing criminal charges in court. This stipulation is intended to uphold MACC's integrity and maintain a clean reputation.

2. Separate body to prosecute cases

Apart from the prosecutorial role defined in Article 145, the attorney-general (AG) is tasked with advising the Cabinet or ministers on legal matters.

To mitigate potential biases resulting from undue influence by the executive branch, the creation of a distinct office solely empowered to prosecute corruption cases, mirroring the structure of the UK's Serious Fraud Office (SFO) is proposed.

The SFO, empowered by the UK's Bribery Act 2010, operates autonomously with specialised prosecutorial powers.

Its mandate ensures that politically sensitive cases are prosecuted impartially, free from executive branch pressures.

Implementing a similar model can provide a fair and balanced approach, ensuring that corruption cases investigated by the MACC receive unbiased treatment, unaffected by political pressures or conflicts of interest within the AG's office.

3. Security of tenure and remuneration

Unlike judges and the AG, the chief commissioner does not have constitutional protection, making them vulnerable to government discretion.

In 2016, the MACC suggested amendments to the Federal Constitution to enhance its independence.

One proposal is to amend Article 132 to include an Anti-Corruption Service, and another is to introduce a new Article 138A specifically for the Anti-Corruption Commission, following the pattern of the Judicial and Legal Service Commission.

Comparatively, the appointment and tenure of judges in Malaysia, governed by Articles 122B and 125 of the Federal Constitution, can offer a model for the MACC.

Judges can have a secure tenure until a specified retirement age and can only be removed by the Yang di-Pertuan Agong under specific conditions, following an investigation by a tribunal.

Applying similar principles to the chief commissioner of the MACC will enhance their independence and transparency, enabling more effective investigations without political interference.

While the MACC functions as another arm of the public service, obtaining funding from the Consolidated Fund, it remains subject to the government presenting a budget and subsequently gaining approval from Parliament. This is in contrast to judges' salaries explicitly designated as "charged on the Consolidated Fund" under Section 18 of the Judges Remuneration Act 1971.

This distinction is crucial as it shows the extent of the commission's independence. Therefore, providing the MACC with a level of financial security akin to



Reforms within the MACC are crucial to ensure its absolute independence, allowing it to function without political interference and maintaining its role in combatting corruption in Malaysia. — REUTERSPIC

“Overcoming corruption does not only depend on reforms. Any effective anti-corruption institution system must be coupled with leaders of strong political commitment or even the most perfect system would be futile.”

that accorded to judges would augment its autonomy by diminishing dependence on government budgetary procedures.

4. Accountability to parliament

The MACC should be accountable to

parliament instead of the prime minister. This can be achieved by abolishing the committees set up in Sections 13, 14 and 15 of the MACC Act 2009.

A new Parliamentary Oversight Committee (POC) should be established, mandatorily consisting of equal members from the opposition and government, excluding administration members.

Under this proposal, MACC would be obligated to regularly submit reports to the POC, encompassing its activities, investigated cases and allocated funds. Any queries raised by the POC would necessitate responses from the MACC.

The POC, in turn, would be responsible for providing regular reports to parliament and responding to inquiries about the MACC's investigation progress and decisions if requested by parliament.

This approach enables continuous public scrutiny of the MACC's operations, enhancing transparency and also public trust in the commission.

The newly proposed POC would consolidate the functions of the current five oversight bodies, ensuring checks and balances on the MACC while optimising resource utilisation.

5. Wider definition of corruption

Section 3 of the MACC Act 2009 should be amended to broaden the definition of “gratification” to include digital assets such as online currency, services or any benefit that exists in electronic form.

Furthermore, a distinction must be made between cultural gift-giving and bribery by amending Section 17 of the MACC Act.

How a gift can be differentiated from a bribe can be based on considerations such as the cultural significance of the gift, the timing of its receipt and the roles and responsibilities of the recipient. By including these factors, cultural practices of such gratification may be a successful defence in law when an individual is charged.

Malaysia should also align its anti-corruption measures with international standards, such as those set out in the United Nations Convention Against Corruption to ensure it is internationally coherent and credible.

In conclusion, overcoming corruption does not only depend on reforms in law. Any effective anti-corruption institution system must be coupled with leaders of strong political commitment or even the most perfect system would be futile and hopeless.

Without a strong political will in Malaysia, leaders and civil servants will only pay lip service to implement anti-corruption policies.

Leaders must also learn to develop a high sense of duty and integrity to steer the country away from corrupt practices.

Singapore, renowned as one of the least corrupt countries in Asia, serves as an example of how corruption can be minimised when a country's leaders are dedicated to the cause.

The article was contributed by Samuel Lau Shiau Song, Tan Yi Jun, Lim Jia Xi, Tan Yee Koon, Thin Shiu Jim and Andy Chong Chun Fai from the “Institutional Affiliation – Taylor’s Impact Lab on Peace, Justice and Strong Institutions,” at Taylor’s University.

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LETTERS

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G25's vision for unity and prosperity

CIVIL society organisation G25 extends New Year wishes to Malaysians for a happy, harmonious and prosperous 2024.

Remaining committed to its role, G25 will continue to support the government in its efforts to develop the country towards becoming one of the most successful among developing nations, with the ultimate aim of achieving developed nation status.

We aspire for our country to be free from corruption, injustice and disharmony. To achieve this goal, we must endeavour to make tangible moves, such as ensuring the strengthening, independence and

transparency of our key institutions of governance to help keep the social malaise in check.

We hope the country's leaders will prioritise these endeavours, enabling a robust democracy and further advancing Malaysia in upholding human rights and individual freedoms.

Increased confidence in our institutions of governance will bode well for the confidence in our economy.

We look forward to the progress of the government's 2024 plans, especially those related to the economy and Masyarakat Madani, and how they will contribute to the

improvement of Malaysians across all segments of society.

As part of this anticipation, we hope for increased transparency and proactivity from the government in its interactions with the public on matters of public interest, including but not limited to initiatives addressing poverty eradication and the bridging of income inequality.

In 2024, we would also like to see greater emphasis towards improving and strengthening our education system to respond to the disruptions caused by the pandemic, and to address the myriad global challenges facing the world.

We urge the government to

engage different stakeholders before making any significant decisions which may affect our children's education.

Elevating the standard of education, which includes instilling critical thinking and proficiency in the English language within our national schools, is essential. This will equip our children to meet the demands of the future global and technological workspace, contributing to higher education, employability and the overall future of the nation.

In anticipation of the transformation in the coming years, G25 looks forward to a more prosperous, united and harmonious

nation under the enlightened and benign rule of the 17th Yang Di-Pertuan Agong, based on the fundamental principles of constitutional monarchy as enshrined in our Constitution.

We are hopeful that the changes will further strengthen our country as a multiracial, multireligious and multicultural society.

We are confident in the shared resolution of the Malaysian people whose wish is to live in a happy and peaceful nation that proudly upholds the principles of tolerance and peaceful co-existence with all races.

RHB, PayNet join forces to enhance payment security

Bank and online network introduce electronic scam prevention tool DuitNow QR Plug & Play Sound Box

PETALING JAYA: In a move to create greater awareness and to combat financial fraud, RHB Banking Group and Payments Network Malaysia (PayNet) collaborated to launch the DuitNow QR Plug & Play Sound Box aimed at enhancing and strengthening payment security for consumers and merchants.

The DuitNow QR Plug & Play Sound Box is an electronic scam prevention tool that supports static and dynamic QR codes, which seamlessly integrates into a merchant's point-of-sale system. The cutting-edge sound box provides a secure and verifiable method for both consumers and merchants to confirm the legitimacy of DuitNow transfers made via QR code.

Upon successfully receiving the DuitNow transfer, the sound box generates an auditory alert and a visual display, providing real-time reassurance that the intended merchant has received the correct payment amount.

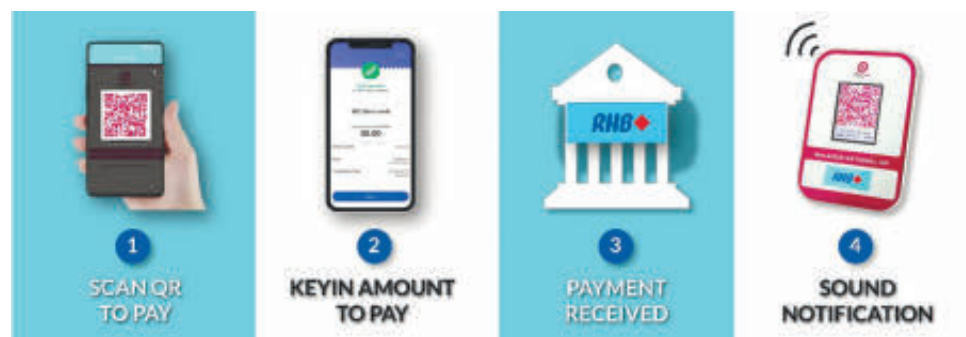
"The introduction of the DuitNow QR Plug & Play Sound Box addresses critical payment security issues, a concern that has grown significantly with the increasing reliance on cashless transactions.

"While we cannot dispute the value of QR codes to ease financial transactions, we acknowledge the security risks involved. These include fake QR codes that deceive consumers into transferring their money to a scammer's bank account, or dishonest customers who use a fake payment receipt to trick merchants into

believing that payment has been made," said RHB Bank Bhd group wholesale banking managing director Syed Ahmad Taufik Albar.

"In response to this, the plug and play sound box serves as an innovative scam prevention tool that benefits merchants and consumers as it simultaneously addresses concerns from both parties through a sound and visual alert. As the first bank to introduce the DuitNow QR sound box, this move reflects our ongoing commitment to protecting merchants and consumers from fraudsters who exploit the convenience of cashless payments," he said.

In its initial phase, the group will deploy the DuitNow QR Plug & Play Sound Box to micro small and medium enterprises in sub-urban locations as part of its joint effort with PayNet to drive financial inclusion in December 2023. By



January 2024, the group will roll out this solution to businesses with high financial transaction volume, including food and beverage outlets, grocery stores, night markets and various retailers.

"The benefits of the sound box will allow more businesses in Malaysia to adopt cashless payments and ultimately pave the way for greater digitalisation. As small businesses are more vulnerable to the impact of payment fraud, using the sound box will provide them with peace of mind regarding QR code transactions.

"This initiative supports PayNet's directive in building a more inclusive financial ecosystem, as well as our RHB's aspiration of empowering small and medium enterprises and micro entrepreneurs," Taufik said.

PayNet chief commercial officer Gary Yeoh said, "Our partnership with RHB underscores PayNet's commitment in empowering MSME growth to thrive in Malaysia's digital economy. The DuitNow QR Plug & Play Sound Box is a result of innovative technology adoption which helps to strengthen security in payment digitalisation and encourages businesses to go cashless."

CIMB completes divestment of residual stake in CGS-CIMB

PETALING JAYA: CIMB Group Holdings Bhd, through CIMB Group Sdn Bhd, has completed the sale of its 25.01% and 25.0% shareholdings in CGS-CIMB Securities International Pte Ltd (CSI) and CGS-CIMB Holdings Sdn Bhd (CCH) respectively to CGS International Holdings Ltd (formerly known as China Galaxy International Financial Holdings Ltd or CGI).

This comes after the final call option exercised by CGI to acquire the remaining shareholding of CIMB Group Sdn Bhd's stake in the two parties' stockbroking joint venture (CGS-CIMB JV), as per the terms of the original partnership agreement. CGI is a subsidiary of China Galaxy Securities Co Ltd (CGS), the fourth largest securities firm in China by revenue in the first half of 2023.

In 2018, CIMB entered into a partnership agreement with CGI to operate a regional stockbroking business in Asia, through the sale of CIMB's stockbroking business into the CGS-CIMB JV, in which CIMB and CGI originally owned 50:50. The partnership agreement incorporated put and call options for CGI to acquire CIMB's stake in the CGS-CIMB JV over a period of time.

CGI had exercised the first call option and completed the acquisition of the 24.99% and 25% stake in the CSI and CCH respectively from CIMB in December 2021, and has now completed the acquisition for the remaining balance in the CGS-CIMB JV to enable CGI to have full 100% ownership of the regional stockbroking business.

CIMB Group CEO Datuk Abdul Rahman Ahmad said, "We are pleased with the successes we have achieved together with CGS over the years where the partnership has enabled the CGS-CIMB JV to grow into one of the leading stockbroking firms in the region. We are thankful to CGS for the partnership, and we look forward to exploring ways where we can collaborate together in the future."

CIMB will receive an estimated gross proceeds of RM780 million for the sale of its residual 25.01% and 25.0% stake in CSI and CCH respectively, bringing the total proceeds for the sale of its 100% original stockbroking business since 2018 to approximately RM2.5 billion.

CIMB has put in place a transition plan, together with CGS-CIMB JV, to ensure the change in shareholdings will not result in any disruptions and the services will continue to be available for all CIMB customers and clients to conduct their activities.

Takaful Malaysia, Bank Muamalat in bancatakaful tie-up

PETALING JAYA: Syarikat Takaful Malaysia Keluarga Bhd (Takaful Malaysia) and its wholly owned subsidiary, Syarikat Takaful Malaysia Am Bhd (Takaful Malaysia Am), have formed a bancatakaful partnership with Bank Muamalat Malaysia Bhd.

The bancatakaful partnership provides Takaful Malaysia access to the customer base, branch network and sales force of Bank Muamalat, and enables the Islamic bank to expand its product offerings in delivering greater value for its customers.

Takaful Malaysia CEO Nor Azman Zainal said, "We are delighted to embark on this collaborative journey with Bank Muamalat. Our partnership reflects our commitment to working together through combined expertise and strengths in offering all-inclusive financial solutions to customers and enhancing customer experience.

"This preferred partnership will provide Bank Muamalat customers access to greater financial

security through our comprehensive and affordable range of family takaful products, from credit-related to advisory and a wide range of general takaful products.

"Our collaboration with Bank Muamalat is timely to further strengthen our bancatakaful portfolio as one of our key business drivers and signify a significant leap forward to maintain our foothold in the insurance and takaful industry."

Bank Muamalat president and CEO Khairul Kamarudin said, "This bancatakaful partnership marks a significant stride towards our goal of becoming the strongest Islamic bank in Malaysia, while also reinforcing our position as the Islamic bank for all.

"By joining forces with Takaful Malaysia, we are not only expanding our product offerings, but we are also reaffirming our commitment to financial inclusion, ensuring that everyone in our diverse customer base can access comprehensive protection solutions. Together, we are one step

closer to realising our vision of being the leading and most inclusive financial institution in the Islamic banking landscape."

Nor Azman said in conclusion, "There are significant opportunities for future growth in the bancatakaful business, and the preferred alliance reflects our dedication to leveraging our capabilities to benefit customers of Bank Muamalat.

"The strategic partnership demonstrates our dedication to putting the well-being of customers at the heart of what we do, and it is a testament to our shared values and strategic move to penetrate the retail segment further while sustaining our leading position in the credit-related business. By leveraging the expertise and strengths of both Islamic financial institutions, we look forward to propel our partnership with Bank Muamalat in achieving new heights and deliver exceptional value to customers and stakeholders."

Takaful Malaysia declares 14 sen dividend for FY23

PETALING JAYA: The board of directors of Syarikat Takaful Malaysia Keluarga has declared an interim single tier dividend of 14 sen per ordinary share, amounting to RM117.22 million for the financial year ended Dec 31, 2023.

The dividend will be paid to shareholders on Feb 2, 2024. The declared dividend translates into a dividend yield of 3.8% based on the closing market price of the group's share of RM3.70 as at Dec 28, 2023.

Takaful Malaysia Group CEO Nor Azman Zainal (pic) said, "The declared dividend reflects our financial strength, positive outlook, and commitment to shareholder returns. While investing in our business for innovation and growth remains a top priority,



we recognise the significance of returning capital to our shareholders. The dividend underscores our confidence in the resilience of our operations and our commitment to delivering value to our shareholders.

"As we navigate dynamic market conditions, we remain focused on executing our strategic initiatives, maintaining financial discipline, and fostering long-term sustainable growth."

He added that they want to achieve sustainable top and bottom-line growth.

Going forward, he said they expect their bancatakaful, treasury, employee benefits and general takaful businesses to continue to

perform and generate business growth.

"We will leverage the positive growth of our bank partners to sustain our market leadership in the bancatakaful business portfolio, develop advisory family takaful business, and further penetrate the retail consumer market," he added.

On Takaful Malaysia's new digital platform and brand "Kaotim", Nor Azman said is a testament to their profound commitment to building their presence in the digital space and remaining relevant and competitive in the market.

"Our focus on retail market expansion is a step forward to diversify our business portfolio and ensure future sustainable business complementing our existing core businesses. We prioritise customer centricity by enhancing the customer journey and providing

comprehensive and affordable protection solutions across multiple touchpoints," he added.

Nor Azman said their general takaful arm will be an imperative growth area, reinforced by their multi-distribution strategy, a new breed of corporate agents for quantum leap business expansion and greater demand for online motor takaful business.

"We will strengthen our corporate agency force by retaining and recruiting high-potential corporate agents, building our online motor customer base, and penetrating other segments to grow our general takaful business. Ultimately, we will continue to capture the next wave of growth and propel Takaful Malaysia to stay dynamic as a leading Islamic financial institution in the insurance and takaful industry," he added.



BY GLORIA HARRY BEATTY
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Macro Tech Ventures aims to reach 300,000 customers

PETALING JAYA: Online marketplace operator Macro Tech Ventures Sdn Bhd, via its platform Borong, aims to reach 300,000 customers in Malaysia and Indonesia this year, underpinned by demand for digital solutions and consumption patterns in the region.

Co-founders Lennise Ng and Haslinda Rasip - who are CEO and chief technology respectively - disclosed this in an exclusive interview with *SunBiz*.

Ng said: "We are optimistic in terms of digital implementation. We've seen a lot of the leaders and governments across the regions that we operate in doubling down on implementing digital solutions, involving the entire ecosystem, and at the same time encouraging more MSME to adopt digital solutions as well as even their own government agencies; for example, Madani's initiative of electronic invoices.

"On consumption patterns, we definitely see a shift. We have started seeing trends of consumers looking for alternative products in the market. The divide between the rich and the poor is getting bigger and, because of this, the patterns and the areas of what they are purchasing also differs. In terms of transactions and sales, it will affect businesses given if they are slower to adopt tech, meaning they don't have the insights and cannot move flexibly."

She added that regardless of size, enterprises should be flexible enough to understand their customers, product movements and distribution to change and adapt to market needs.

Currently, the company has more than 200,000 clients in the three countries that it operates in, with the bulk of its revenue contributed by Malaysia (70%), followed by Indonesia (25%) and Singapore (5%).

In terms of market share in Malaysia, Ng said the company operates about RM3 billion in transaction volume annually.

"We are already operating breakeven as a tech company. For next year, we are quite optimistic in terms, of how we're able to grow that ... at least we (aim) to grow 20% of our net profit," she added.

In terms of challenges, Ng said digital adoption is still low in

➤ Online marketing platform operator optimistic on Malaysia and Indonesia, cites digitalisation demand and shift in consumption trends



Haslinda says Macro Tech Venture wants to be data and insight driven.

Malaysia, primarily due to lack of awareness or education among businesses. She encouraged MSMEs to take small steps towards digitalisation through utilising digital tools, even those that are available free of charge.

"Transforming your business to be in the digital era is about figuring out what works for your business first. Those that we work with, we tell them that they don't need a full-fledged entire ERP (enterprise resource planning) systems and solutions to change from end to end.

"They just need to know what are the solutions they need to implement to grow their sales. That should be the objective, not to digitalise for the sake of digitalisation - they need to digitalise for sales," she said.

Ng explained that enterprises that mostly operate their business offline faced difficulties in keeping track of



Ng says company registers about RM3 billion in transaction volume annually.

their stock as the process was often done manually.

By adding an online element, namely through its software, it will enhance and simplify clients' stock management process. Moreover, the data captured will alert its clients to replenish inventory as well as provide insights such as stock recommendation, based on customer buying trends.

Haslinda said, "85% of transactions still happen offline. For the past six years, we have been trying to capture and digitalise offline data to online, to have better insights. Previously, there were only 50% online purchase transactions between business to business. We believe that we have reached the midpoint of the mass numbers, data points for us to really come up with quality insights for retailers and suppliers."

To date, Borong offers three

products, namely "marketplace", "direct" and "credit".

"Marketplace" serves mum-and-pop shops or retailers, acting as a smart product recommendation platform.

"Direct" services suppliers to provide them with the right tools to serve retailers or mom-and-pop stores in an optimised way, while 'credit' involves our company working together with financial institutions to provide tailored SME financing products to all businesses on our platform," said Ng.

The majority of its clientele are made up of micro, small and medium enterprises, followed by a small number of well-known brands. On emerging trends, Ng saw more demand for local products and reckoned that Malaysians are looking into local products as a cheaper alternative and also to support local brands.

"Local brands which tend to be more expensive are more popular within metropolitan areas like Kuala Lumpur, in Penang, Johor and Selangor ... those regions, we see a growing trend mainly because the spending power is higher, while customers in regions with lower (spending power seek) cheaper options," she said.

Ng said the company is not planning to expand beyond the markets it operates for the time being and will focus on enhancing values and technology this year.

"We want to focus on how we can

help to optimise and create more value first within those three countries that we operate in. Once we're able to do so, then we will expand to other countries.

"It will take probably 12 to 18 months, mainly due to economical shift changes. In the next few years, Southeast Asia has been predicted as a region that would be experiencing global recession.

"We want to prepare all these businesses to be ready and it will be our main priority," she added.

If an opportunity for expansion arises, it will target Thailand, Vietnam or the Philippines.

Ng said the bulk of its annual capex and opex will go into investing to advance its artificial intelligence technology which it incorporates in its system to improve its existing software to make it smarter by working together with the right partners.

Haslinda remarked that the company aims to be data and insight driven, through enhancing the values via captured data.

"Even this year, we discovered a lot of pain points from users, (which we need to fix). There will be more initiatives to capture more data and to process the data to provide more valuable insights for businesses," she said.

Ng said that most of its clients are from the fast-moving consumer goods, food and beverage as well as machinery, repairs and offices industry.

Moving forward, Macro Tech Ventures is looking to potentially enter into the automotive space, due to the demand from independent car workshops which face the same issues as its MSME clients.



Confront problems promptly, businesses advised

BY HAYATUN RAZAK
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KUALA LUMPUR: Malaysian companies grappling with financial problems often face tax-related issues, said business turnaround specialist and Vad Capital Sdn Bhd managing director Vivek Sasheendran (pic).

"Usually, when we are called in, there is already a situation. Companies are either losing revenue, experiencing losses or facing significant problems. We have banks coming in, creditors coming in and debtors that need to be paid. So typically, many of the key areas we are called in to address start with tax

... which should be addressed promptly," he told *SunBiz*.

His advice - when going through a crisis, it is always best to face the problems rather than run away from them.

"A lot of times, we see problems because the people in charge avoid the problems. You owe people money, you don't meet them. You run away from them, and that makes the problem worse. When you have legal suits coming your way, then everybody's eyes are on you.



"So that is what I see a lot. When there is a problem, people just shut off. Especially the directors. They just shut off, they just focus on what came first. They let it go, and then the problem becomes too big to handle," Vivek said.

He said that in legal processes, everything is time-bound, and companies need to act fast or there will be a significant cost to be paid.

"When you receive letters from lawyers, you cannot ignore them,

otherwise you may get things like judgement in default. Undoing these things is very costly and disrupts what we are supposed to do for the company.

"That's why we always advise them to do a perimeter check because you don't want to be in that situation. A perimeter check will be much cheaper than engaging in full-blown legal proceedings," said Vivek.

He added that these businesses should conduct regular health checks on their financial status as there have been a lot of changes that have happened in the last few years.

"Our advice is always to do a perimeter check. When there is a

slight dip or when there is no problem, consider calling people like us to do a health check on the company. We will go in, look at your finances, address all your legal problems, sit down with your heads of departments, identify the issues, and move forward," he said.

Additionally, Vivek mentioned an increasing number of businesses seeking assistance in cybersecurity that reflects a broader trend in businesses.

"The latest stretch that we also had is on the IT side of things. Which is why recently we have made an investment in a cybersecurity company. That is something additional," he disclosed.

Claiming compensation from IRB for late refunds

ALL taxpayers are eligible to receive compensation for late refund of overpaid taxes by the Inland Revenue Board (IRB). The rate of compensation is 2% per annum, which has been available from the year of assessment 2013.

Sadly, we do not notice the IRB automatically paying this compensation. The law does not mandatorily force the IRB to pay the compensation because it does not use the words "shall be payable", but instead it uses the words "may be payable".

At the time the law was introduced, the intention was to ensure that there would not be any delay in refunds of taxes because any delays would cost the government money (i.e. a reverse penalty).

However, since the IRB has become diligent in imposing the 10% penalties automatically for late payment of taxes through its computer system, the same level of

diligence is missing when it comes to compensation for late refunds. The proper way of acting responsibly and reciprocating its cooperation with taxpayers would be to automatically provide the 2% compensation through the computer system.



TAX MATTERS
B.S.M. THANNEERMALAI

Eligibility for compensation

Taxpayers are entitled to the compensation only if they have filed their tax returns within the stipulated due date under the Income Tax Act 1967 or within the extended time frame allowed by the IRB and have paid their taxes on time. Individuals under employment must have complied with the monthly deduction of tax, and other individuals who have been issued with instalment payment notices under CP500 should have paid their tax instalments on time.

Similarly, businesses, LLPS, trust bodies and cooperatives societies should have paid their monthly tax instalment payments on time.

How is the 2% calculated?

The rate of compensation is 2% per annum and it will be payable on the amount refunded after either 90 days from the due date for the electronic filing or 120 days from the due date for manual filing. It is calculated on the number of days beginning after the 90- or 120-day period up to the point the tax is refunded.

Compensation wrongly paid

If the Director General discovers that the compensation has been wrongly paid, he can require the person to return the monies and he can impose a 10% penalty on the amount wrongly paid. On top of the 10% penalty on the compensation, if the Director General subsequently commences an audit on the taxpayer and alleges that the tax return filed by the taxpayer is incorrect or he has given incorrect information, he can impose a further penalty up to 100%.

One must be very careful before this 2% penalty is claimed as the Director General can always start an audit and not only get back his 2%, but also collect more taxes and penalties via an audit adjustment.

Do you or do you not claim the 2%?

The way forward would be: if the IRB mandatorily gives you the 2% after doing its internal checks, then the issue of the 10% penalty should not arise as the taxpayer did not make the claim. However, where the taxpayer makes the claim, as the law stands at the moment, the taxpayer faces the possibility of being subjected to additional taxes and penalties in the event the IRB initiates an audit against the taxpayer. Therefore, the pragmatic decision for businesses would be not to claim this 2% and potentially face greater counterclaims by the IRB.

For the IRB to build trust with taxpayers, it would be good for it to come out and openly state it will not initiate any audits just because a taxpayer applies for the 2% compensation.

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

DS Sigma buys land in Selangor to build factory

PETALING JAYA: Packaging solutions provider DS Sigma Holdings Bhd's wholly owned subsidiary Dai Suwon Packaging Sdn Bhd has inked a sale and purchase agreement with UMW Development Sdn Bhd for the acquisition of vacant leasehold industrial land measuring about four acres in Serendah, Selangor, for RM12.2 million.

The land, which is part of UMW High Value Manufacturing Park, will be used to establish a factory to manufacture large paper packaging products and other related packaging materials to meet the demand of DSG Sigma's new customers in the solar photovoltaic industry within the northern region of Peninsular Malaysia.

MYAirline issues caution on refund scams

PETALING JAYA: MYAirline has issued an alert about potential scams related to pending refunds and advised caution and awareness to prevent any fraudulent activities.

In a statement issued on Saturday, the airline said there have been reports of individuals falsely claiming to be representatives of MYAirline, reaching out to customers awaiting refunds for their flight bookings.

The airline has advised customers to verify the source when receiving communication regarding refunds.

"Check for official email addresses or contact numbers associated with MYAirline. Avoid sharing personal information – please do not disclose personal or financial details to any unverified source claiming to be from MYAirline," it added.

M'sia tops global Islamic economy indicator for 10th year: HDC

KUALA LUMPUR: Malaysia has once again secured the top position in the Global Islamic Economy Indicator (GIEI) for the 10th consecutive year, Halal Development Corporation Bhd (HDC) said.

"The 2023 rankings place Malaysia at the forefront, followed closely by Saudi Arabia, Indonesia, and the UAE," it said in a statement.

Citing the 2023/2024 edition of the State of the Global Islamic Economy (SGIE) report, HDC said Malaysia secured first place in Islamic finance,

halal food, and media and recreation, coupled with a commendable second-place ranking in "modest fashion", third spot in pharmaceuticals and fifth in tourism.

Since the inception of the SGIE Report, Malaysia has consistently claimed first position, showcasing the nation's enduring commitment to the Islamic economy, it said.

HDC chairman Khairul Azwan Harun said the milestone underscores the sustained progress within Malaysia's halal ecosystem since the

establishment of HDC in 2006.

"Malaysia pledges to uphold its leading position with the implementation of the Halal Industry Master Plan (HIMP 2030), embracing technology, and digitising the halal ecosystem.

"HIMP 2030 is instrumental in driving the comprehensive expansion of Malaysia's halal industry, fostering inclusivity and robust growth," he added.

The SGIE Report is prepared by Dinar Standards, a US-based research and advisory firm specialising in government

innovation, the global halal economy, and social impact spaces.

Moving forward, HDC said Malaysia anticipates continued leadership, driven by year-on-year growth in halal foods and bolstered by the increasing worldwide demand for products that adhere to halal standards.

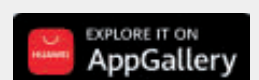
Malaysia, with 84 recognised certification bodies to date, is well positioned to comply and participate, particularly in the halal ingredients sector such as halal gelatin, it added. – Bernama

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Boosting security in cyber realm post-Covid pandemic

➤ Index implies developing nations are better equipped than developed ones in reducing risk of digital crime and implementing measures

THE Covid-19 pandemic has had a profound effect on all facets of our life, including the state of the digital world. To maintain their safety, people had to get used to new modes of working, studying, communicating and using services online. Cybercriminals, however, grabbed the chance to exploit weaknesses along with these changes, which resulted in a rise in cybercrime.

The 2020 Internet Crime Report estimates that losses from cybercrime exceeded US\$4.2 billion (Ruposky, 2022; FBI, 2021). Phishing and extortion were the two main types of cybercrime. Unfortunately, considering how drastically the epidemic has altered daily life, cybersecurity safeguards are the main concerns nowadays.

Denmark, the US, Finland, South Korea and the UK are the top five countries identified as the most cyber-secure countries in the world. The data retrieved from the National Cyber Power Index from Harvard University rates those nations according to their digital capabilities, taking into account things like infrastructure investment, online rules, international cyber agreements, and e-governance. This analysis not only helps decision makers understand what other strong countries are doing, but it also helps them develop their own approaches to internet-related issues.

The National Cyber Power Index is an effective instrument that ranks the most dominant nations in cyberspace and provides experts with information on how well each nation's cyber operations are performing.

According to research conducted in the US, for instance, internet usage rose by 17% during the epidemic (Muncaster, 2020). Additionally, in just one month, the number of online visits to tutoring platforms increased by 400%, with major increases in the fields of politics (320%), television (210%), and horticulture (200%) (Naidoo, 2020).

If companies did not proactively plan for and take precautions against prospective cyberattacks, they ran a higher risk of



The digital environment has been affected by the Covid-19 pandemic in ways that go beyond what is immediately visible. – AFPPIIC

experiencing operational and financial failures.

This article examines the effects of Covid-19 on cybersecurity and offers methods to improve online security and privacy that are supported by empirical data.

Our digital environment was affected by the pandemic in ways that went beyond what was immediately visible. The International Telecommunication Union (ITU) in 2021 stressed the need for strengthened cybersecurity measures in less developed countries to effectively combat the escalating cyber threats, despite the fact that people in developed nations like Australia perceived to have greater awareness of cybercrime and cybersecurity compared to people in developing countries like Malaysia.

However, surprisingly, pre-pandemic records from the cybercrime statistics reported by Department of Statistics Malaysia and the Australian Cyber Security Centre show that Australia had higher rates of cybercrime than Malaysia with more than 58,000 cases (A\$634 million) for Australia and less than 11,000 cases (RM539 million) in 2019.

However, compared to Malaysia, Australia saw a proportionally larger rise in cybercrime assaults during the pandemic in 2021 with 67,500 cases (A\$33 billion) for Australia and 20,805 cases (RM560 million) for Malaysia. It is interesting to note that there was little difference in cybersecurity performance between the two nations; in fact, Malaysia

outperformed Australia in the cybersecurity performance index (Malaysia at 5th and Australia at 12th) according to Global Cybersecurity Index (2021) by ITU.

These results imply that developing nations are better equipped than developed nations to reduce the risk of cybercrime and implement cybersecurity measures. The presumptive effective solutions of fintech and digitalisation against cybercrime may not be sufficient without considerable investments in knowledge and competency programmes to enhance cybersecurity awareness throughout the public.

In conclusion, the Covid-19 pandemic sparked a rapid revolution in many spheres of life, including the digital space. Cybercriminals then benefitted from the rise in online activity brought on by the development of remote work, online learning, and virtual communication. However, there has not been much improvement in cybersecurity measures. Developed and underdeveloped nations, however, have competitive development in cybercrime awareness and cybersecurity performance. Protecting against cyberattacks remains of the utmost importance as the digital landscape changes constantly. Thus, collaborations from all stakeholders are vital to protect the digital realm.

This article was contributed by Dr Ainul Huda Jamil, UKM-Graduate School of Business.

Clear policy and economic direction vital, says IECM

PETALING JAYA: The International Entrepreneurs Chamber Malaysia (IECM) has urged the government to set a clear policy and economic direction as investors and businesses want clarity, consistency, and continuity, while maintaining a competitive and business-friendly environment.

IECM president Badariah Badaruddin said political stability is a variable of great importance in building a coherent and continuous path for sustainable development.

The uncertainty associated with an unstable political environment would determine the investors' confidence, would reduce investment, and further hinder the pace of economic development. Thus, setting such a clear policy is of utmost importance, she said.

"The government agencies must be responsive to radical changes and come up with new solutions to make Malaysia a progressive and competitive nation.

"More importantly, the current government

should engage the stakeholders in dialogues as well as discussions between the public and private sectors prior to implementation to ensure the feasibility of the policy," she said in her welcoming remarks during IECM's 5th annual general meeting on Saturday.

IECM will continue to make suggestions to the government to enhance the public and private partnership to implement the economic recovery plan effectively, adopt more measures for long-term growth and sustainable development in the next national budget, she said.

"National unity is a key force to propel our country forward. The government should continue to practise pluralism, strengthen national unity and racial harmony to safeguard the well-being of the people.

"In this regard, political leaders should put the country and rakyat's interests ahead of anything while the government and technocrats should focus addressing on long-term issues,"

she added.

On the latest framework announced by Prime Minister Datuk Seri Anwar Ibrahim, which aims to boost the economy and provide revenue spillover to the people, Badariah hopes the Madani Economy structural reforms will create meaningful job opportunities, ensure equal opportunities, and establish a social protection network for all.

Meanwhile, IECM will be organising the IECM Regional Business Networking Forum on Entrepreneurship Development 2024 on Oct 15-16 at the World Trade Centre Kuala Lumpur.

"We are trying to get in touch with as many entrepreneurs as possible from Malaysia and foreign countries. This event is supported by government agencies such as Malaysia External Trade Development Corporation, SME Corp, Halal Development Corporation Bhd, Credit Counselling and Debt Management Agency, and Majlis Amanah Rakyat," Badariah said. – Bernama

Synergy House declares first interim dividend of 1 sen for FY23

PETALING JAYA: Synergy House Bhd, a cross-border e-commerce seller and exporter of ready-to-assemble (RTA) home furniture, declared a first single-tier interim dividend of 1 sen per ordinary share for the financial year ended Dec 31, 2023.

The dividend declaration follows the group's financial performance over the year, with revenue of RM179.4 million and profit before tax (PBT) of RM23.4 million for the nine-month period ending Sept 30, 2023.

These figures, which include revenue of RM69.2 million and PBT of RM11.4 million for the third quarter alone, underscore the group's successful strategies in both business-to-consumer (B2C) and business-to-business (B2B) segments, particularly in key markets such as the US and the UK.

Synergy House has announced that the company's securities will be traded ex-dividend from Jan 11. The last date of lodgement is set for Jan 12, with the dividend payable by Jan 31.

The group's strategic focus on enhancing online presence and customer engagement has been pivotal in driving growth and expanding market reach. This is evident where in the nine months ended Sept 30, 2023, the group recorded total B2C revenue of RM77.1 million which far exceeded the total B2C revenue of RM49.6 million achieved by the group in the 12-month financial year ended Dec 31, 2022.

The share price of Synergy House closed at RM0.705 on Dec 29, 2023, representing a market capitalisation of RM352.5 million. Based on that, the group's share price has increased by about 63.95% from the IPO price of RM0.43 and has doubled from the closing price on the first day of its listing.

Gentari acquires offshore wind capability via stake in Hai Long project

PETALING JAYA: Clean energy solutions provider Gentari, through its subsidiary Gentari International Renewables Pte Ltd, has added offshore wind capacity into its portfolio following an investment into the Hai Long project located off the Changhua coast in the Taiwan Straits.

The investment sees Gentari taking a 49% stake in Canada-based Northland Power Inc's ownership of the offshore wind project, equivalent to a 29.4% indirect equity interest. Northland now holds 30.6% ownership interest and will continue to take the lead role in the construction and operation of the project developed as a joint venture between Northland and Japan-based Mitsui & Co.

Comprising two phases, the project has an expected combined generating capacity of 1,022MW and will play an important role in helping Taiwan achieve its renewable energy target of 15GW of offshore wind to be constructed between 2026 and 2035. Once operational, Hai Long will be the largest offshore wind project surrounding the island, besides being one of the largest offshore wind facilities in Asia, providing enough clean energy to power more than one million households as well as industrial facilities in Taiwan.

Gentari's global aspiration includes building 30GW to 40GW in renewable energy capacity by 2030 through projects across solar, onshore and offshore wind and battery storage, targeting utility-scale, commercial, industrial and retail customers.

China December factory activity **worsens**

➤ Shrinkage for third straight month due to local debt issues, soft global demand

BEIJING: China's manufacturing activity shrank for a third straight month in December and weakened more than expected, clouding the outlook for the country's economic recovery and raising the case for fresh stimulus measures in the new year.

The government has in recent months introduced a series of policies to shore up a feeble post-pandemic recovery, which is being held back by a severe property slump, local government debt risks and soft global demand. But the world's second-largest economy is still struggling to gain traction.

The official purchasing managers' index (PMI) fell to 49.0 in December from 49.4 the previous month, an official factory survey showed on Sunday, below the 50-mark separating growth from contraction and weaker than a median forecast of 49.5 in a

Reuters poll.

"We must step up policy support, otherwise the trend of slowing growth will continue," said Nie Wen, an economist at Hwabao Trust. Nie expects the central bank to cut interest rates and banks' reserve requirement ratios (RRR) in the coming weeks.

"Falling prices have greatly affected companies' profits and further affected people's employment and incomes. We may see a vicious cycle," he said.

China's central bank said on Thursday it would step up policy adjustments to support the economy and promote a rebound in prices, amid signs of rising deflationary pressures.

Earlier this month, top Chinese leaders at a key meeting to chart the economic course for 2024 pledged to take more steps to support the recovery next year.

Five of China's largest state banks lowered interest rates on some deposits on Dec 22, the third round of such cuts this year, which could help the central bank move toward easing monetary policy.

The government, which in October unveiled plans to issue 1 trillion yuan (RM647 billion) in sovereign bonds to fund investment projects, is likely to focus on more fiscal steps to support growth next year, analysts said.

China's consumer prices fell the fastest in three years in November while factory-gate deflation deepened, weighed by weak domestic demand.

"The current external environment is increasingly complex, severe, and uncertain," the statistical bureau said.

"Some companies in the survey reported that reduced overseas orders and insufficient

domestic effective demand are the main difficulties faced by the companies."

The new orders sub-index was at 48.7, contracting for the third month, according to the PMI survey released by the National Bureau of Statistics.

Weak external demand also remained a major drag on factory activity, with new export orders index registering 45.8 in December, contracting for the ninth straight month.

The sub-index of factory gate prices was at 47.7, contracting for a third straight month, adding to signs of deflation and pressure on business profits.

The official non-manufacturing purchasing managers' index (PMI), which includes services and construction, rose to 50.4 from 50.2 in November, supported by a recovery in the vast services sector.

China's economic growth is seen on track to hit the official target of around 5% this year and Beijing is expected to maintain the target next year. - Reuters



The object of the lawsuit was the 'incognito' mode on Google's Chrome browser gave users a false sense that what they were surfing online was not being tracked by the Silicon Valley tech firm. - UNSPLASH PIX

Google to settle US\$5b lawsuit over 'incognito' mode

SAN FRANCISCO: Google has agreed to settle a consumer privacy lawsuit seeking at least US\$5 billion (RM23 billion) in damages over allegations it tracked the data of users who thought they were browsing the internet privately.

The object of the lawsuit was the "incognito" mode on Google's Chrome browser that the plaintiffs said gave users a false sense that what they were surfing online was not being tracked by the Silicon Valley tech firm.

But internal Google emails brought forward in the lawsuit demonstrated that users using incognito mode were being followed by the search and advertising behemoth for measuring web traffic and selling ads.

In a court filing, the judge confirmed that lawyers for Google reached a preliminary agreement to settle the class action lawsuit - originally filed in 2020 - which claimed that

"millions of individuals" had likely been affected.

Lawyers for the plaintiffs were seeking at least US\$5,000 for each user it said had been tracked by the firm's Google Analytics or Ad Manager services even when in the private browsing mode and not logged into their Google account.

This would have amounted to at least US\$5 billion, though the settlement amount will likely not reach that figure, and no amount was given for the preliminary settlement between the parties.

Google and lawyers for the consumers did not respond to an AFP request for comment.

The settlement came just weeks after Google was refused a request that the case be decided by a judge. A jury trial was set to begin next year.

The lawsuit, filed in a California court, claimed Google's practices had infringed on users' privacy by "intentionally" deceiving

them with the incognito option.

The original complaint alleged that Google and its employees had been given the "power to learn intimate details about individuals' lives, interests, and internet usage."

"Google has made itself an unaccountable trove of information so detailed and expansive that George Orwell could never have dreamed it," it added.

A formal settlement is expected for court approval by Feb 24, 2024.

Class action lawsuits have become the main venue to challenge big tech companies on data privacy matters in the US, which lacks a comprehensive law on the handling of personal data.

In August, Google paid US\$23 million to settle a long-running case over giving third-parties access to user search data.

In 2022, Facebook parent company Meta settled a similar case, agreeing to pay US\$725 million over the handling of user data. - AFP

Microsoft will finally make its mark in mobile

NEW YORK: Microsoft is finally answering the call on mobile. After missing out on much of the boom, the software goliath is in prime position to make up for lost time. Boss Satya Nadella's two latest deals provide a useful boost, but engaging in app wars also carries great risk.

Buying "Call of Duty" maker Activision Blizzard affords Microsoft as much opportunity in smartphones as it does to upgrade its Xbox division. One of the company's most valuable assets, and a big contributor to its US\$3.5 billion (RM16 billion) of 2022 mobile revenue, is "Candy Crush Saga". Released in 2012, the addictive tile-matching video game, which has been downloaded some 5 billion times, keeps topping the charts more than a decade later, according to research outfit Sensor Tower.

Artificial intelligence gives Microsoft another way to dial in to the market. Its US\$10 billion capital injection into ChatGPT owner OpenAI should help Nadella expand further beyond its primary business customers. The chatbot racked up more than 100 million users within two months of its release, making it the fastest rollout UBS analysts had seen in two decades of following the industry.

Together, these two investments increase Microsoft's ability to gauge consumer behavior, using data collected from in-app purchases and cloud gaming subscriptions. It also ratchets up the competition with other technology titans fiercely competing to match or surpass human intelligence.

Nadella's growing mobile clout already has emboldened him to talk with partners about starting Microsoft's own gaming app store. The company previously staked some ground by testifying for "Fortnite" parent Epic Games in its ongoing lawsuit against Apple and Google, which alleges that monopoly power enables them to force developers to use proprietary payment systems that take a 30% cut of purchases.

The European Commission, meanwhile, recently targeted six tech "gatekeepers", which could lead to third-party workarounds of the two operating-system goliaths. With Microsoft's branding power, its own Xbox shop would be an attractive alternative and threaten the fees Apple and Google collect. Gaming accounted for an estimated 20%, or US\$17 billion, of Apple's services revenue for the year ending September 2023, according to Jefferies analysts.

Throwing its weight around in mobile will invite more regulatory scrutiny of Microsoft, after largely avoiding the spotlight in the 25 years since it was a defendant in a landmark US antitrust case. Increased market power should also reverse another piece of history in a more beneficial way. When asked about the newly released iPhone a dozen years ago, Microsoft's then-boss Steve Ballmer cackled about its prospects. Nadella may yet have the last laugh. - Reuters

Boeing: All 737 MAXs operated by Chinese airlines back in service

BEIJING: All Boeing 737 MAX jets operated by Chinese carriers are back in service at the end of 2023, the US planemaker's China head said last Friday, nearly a year after they started flying following a global grounding in 2019.

The best-selling Boeing model was grounded after fatal crashes in Indonesia and Ethiopia. The MAX returned to service around the world starting in late 2020 after modifications to the aircraft and pilot training, but Chinese airlines started to fly them again only in January 2023.

"All China civil aviation 737 MAXs have resumed operations," Boeing China CEO Liu Qing said on Chinese social media, adding that this amounted to nearly 100 planes.

The culmination of the MAX's return to service in China comes as Boeing conducts preparatory activities and flight tests on a number of 737 MAX jets designated for Chinese customers, raising speculation that the US planemaker could soon restart deliveries of the MAX to China, which have been suspended since 2019.

A restart of MAX deliveries would be a major breakthrough for Boeing's relationship with China, which has been impacted by the MAX crisis and US-China political tensions. It would also be a financial win for Boeing, allowing it to collect payment for dozens of Chinese MAX planes in its inventory.

The company last week made its first direct delivery of a 787 Dreamliner to China since 2019, a step seen as a possible prelude to the end of Beijing's freeze on 737 MAX deliveries. Through November, it also handed over eight



The MAX returned to service around the world starting in late 2020 after modifications to the aircraft and pilot training, but Chinese airlines started to fly them again only in January 2023. — AFPPIX

777 freighters to Chinese customers, according to Boeing data.

Boeing has been virtually frozen out of new orders from China since 2017 amid Sino-US trade tensions.

Boeing on Thursday said it had instructed airlines to check all MAX planes for a possible loose bolt in the rudder control system after loose or missing hardware was

found on two planes.

Ryanair, which operates the 737-8200 version of the MAX, has inspected all its MAX aircraft, a spokesman said.

"No issues have been identified," the spokesman said.

Southwest Airlines, which has an all-737 fleet, said it was conducting inspections "during routine overnight maintenance with no

operational effects."

FlyDubai, another carrier that exclusively operates 737s, is currently conducting inspections of its fleet and does not expect them to have any effect to the airline's scheduled operations, a spokesman said.

"Any findings will be reported through our Safety Management System," the spokesman said. — Reuters

Will the Magnificent Seven drive US stocks in 2024?

➤ Fund managers face choice of staying with top players, or wagers on other shares

NEW YORK: As a strong year in US stocks comes to a close, fund managers face a potentially consequential choice in 2024: stick with the few massive growth and technology names that have powered equity indices higher, or take a shot on the rest of the market.

Shares of the so-called Magnificent Seven — Apple, Microsoft, Alphabet, Amazon, Nvidia, Meta Platforms and Tesla — individually soared between around 50% and 240% in 2023, making them among the market's most rewarding bets.

Because of their heavy weightings in the S&P 500, the seven were responsible for nearly two-thirds of the benchmark index's 24% gain last year, data last month showed.

The S&P 500's gain was its biggest since 2021. The Nasdaq Composite, which has a heavier focus on tech, surged 43.4% last year, its biggest annual rise since 2020.

Not surprisingly, fund managers in BofA Global Research's most recent survey said owning the seven stocks was the market's "most crowded" trade.

But expectations that the Federal Reserve will cut interest rates this year while the economy avoids recession have awoken other parts of the market in recent weeks. Meanwhile, some investors say the huge rallies in the seven may have left them overvalued or vulnerable to profit-taking.

"When you have seven companies that are huge in the index all going up, that is good for the market," said Jonathan Cofsky, portfolio manager for the Global Technology and Innovation team at Janus Henderson Investors. "But I think there are probably more opportunities in the rest of the market, depending on rates and the economy."

Data last week from the Apollo Group showed 72% of the S&P 500's stocks underperformed the index last year, a record.

However, there are signs the rally is broadening. The equal-weight S&P 500 — a proxy for the average stock — climbed 6.7% in December against a 4.5% rise for the standard index, after lagging most of the year.

Meanwhile, the previously sluggish small-cap Russell 2000 soared 12% in December, its biggest monthly gain in three years.

With the weighting of the Magnificent Seven in the S&P 500 swelling, a bad year for the group could spell trouble for the broader market if other stocks don't take up the slack.

Other important factors for the market this year include whether inflation continues to ebb, allowing the Fed to cut rates at the pace markets expect, as well as the continued resilience of the US economy. The run-up to the US presidential elections in November also could increase market volatility.

Of course, other areas of the market might struggle to replicate features that attracted investors to the seven in the first place. Their size and competitive advantages made them a refuge for investors worried about economic fallout from aggressive monetary policy tightening the Fed embarked on to calm surging inflation.

Excitement over the business potential from emerging artificial intelligence technology also helped propel some of the megacaps in 2023 including Nvidia and Microsoft, which jumped 239% and 57%, respectively.

Another factor is profitability: the Magnificent Seven are expected to post a 39.5% aggregate earnings increase in 2023,

against a 2.6% decline for the rest of the S&P 500, according to LSEG data. Their earnings growth is expected to outperform again in 2024, albeit by a lesser extent.

But the Magnificent Seven stocks are trading at more expensive valuations overall after their gains. According to LSEG Datastream, they recently traded at an average forward price-to-earnings ratio of 33.6 times, while the S&P 500 was at 19.8 times.

"They don't get the low-hanging fruit of coming into this year weak as ... a starting point," said Matt Benkendorf, chief investment officer of the Vontobel Quality Growth Boutique.

Vontobel Quality Growth holds Microsoft, Amazon and Alphabet in its portfolios, but not the other four companies where Benkendorf sees more operating challenges.

Cofsky, meanwhile, said his funds own at least some of the Magnificent Seven but he sees potential rotation into small or mid-cap tech stocks in 2024 if rates continue to moderate.

BMO Capital Markets strategist Brian Belski recommended investors own "a little bit of everything" in the coming year, given his "expectation for individual stock participation to broaden significantly," following narrow breadth relative to history in 2023.

Others believe the Magnificent Seven will continue drawing investors hoping for a repeat of their performance last year.

The Magnificent Seven's dominance in key indexes means they are widely owned by mutual funds and ETFs and may benefit as money comes off the sidelines into stocks, said Francisco Bido, senior portfolio manager at F/m Investments.

He counts all of the seven as long-term holdings in his portfolios, except for Tesla.

"It's a little bit of a feedback loop," Bido said. "They get bigger, people want even more." — Reuters

Hapag-Lloyd, two Japanese shipping lines still avoiding Suez Canal

BERLIN: Hapag-Lloyd will continue to divert its vessels around the Suez Canal for security reasons, a spokesperson for the German container shipper said on Friday, adding a further assessment would be made tomorrow.

Mitsui O.S.K. Lines and Nippon Yusen, Japan's largest shipping companies, also said their vessels with links to Israel were avoiding the Red Sea area. Both companies said they were monitoring the situation.

Shipping companies including Hapag-Lloyd and Denmark's Maersk earlier last month stopped using Red Sea routes and the Suez Canal after Yemen's Houthi militant group began targeting vessels, disrupting global trade.

Instead, they re-routed ships around Africa via the Cape of Good Hope to avoid attacks, charging customers extra fees and adding days or weeks to the time it takes to transport goods from Asia to Europe and to the east coast of North America.

The situation remains uncertain and shipping companies are taking different approaches.

Maersk is planning to sail almost all container vessels travelling between Asia and Europe through the Suez Canal from now on while diverting only a handful around Africa, a Reuters breakdown of the group's schedule showed on Thursday.

France's CMA CGM is also increasing the number of vessels it has travelling through the Suez Canal, it said on Tuesday.

Shares in Hapag Lloyd were up 1.1% on Friday. Shares in Maersk were up 1.8%. Shares in shipping companies have risen since the crisis began on expectations that longer routes will result in higher freight rates.

CMA CGM is among container lines to have introduced surcharges due to the re-routing of vessels, adding to rising costs for sea transport since the Houthis started targeting vessels.

Mediterranean Shipping Co's container ship *United VIII* was attacked while transiting the Red Sea, it said on Tuesday. The Houthis also on Tuesday claimed to have fired missiles at the vessel, without saying it was struck. — Reuters



US, China remain top credit ratings to watch this year

➤ Turkiye could see first upgrade, Panama might be junked while Oman is expected to see continued upgrade

LONDON: The US and China on downgrade warnings, Turkiye hoping for its first upgrade in a decade and Israel facing its first cut – plus more than 50 elections to navigate – means 2024 could bring pivotal moves in some sovereign credit ratings.

This year might be starting with highest share of “stable” sovereign ratings for years, but with record debts now meeting higher borrowing costs, spluttering growth and multiple wars, there are big

names in play.

Moody's has negative outlooks on both the US and China, the world's two biggest economies. A downgrade would cost the US its only remaining triple-A rating.

Marie Diron at Moody's said it wants to see if Washington can address a threatened “very steep deterioration in debt affordability” and whether China can stop its property and local government debt woes worsening.

Fitch, which downgraded the US

in August, and S&P Global are also keeping a close eye as November's presidential election approaches.

“Many of the factors we pointed to with the (US) downgrade remain in effect,” Fitch's Ed Parker said, explaining that higher interest rates, defence spending and an aging population would all keep US debt levels rising.

Fitch sees Chinese growth dipping to 4.5-5% but has also modelled a “hypothetical stress scenario” where the property sector and other problems cause it crater to just 1.5% and only recover to 2% in 2025.

“A downgrade would be likely in such a scenario,” Parker said, although “we wouldn't expect more than a one-notch move” given China's broader strengths.

Turkiye meanwhile could see its first upgrade in over a decade, if President Tayyip Erdogan's new finance minister and central bank head keep policy repair efforts going, and Oman could be elevated to investment-grade.

Moody's Diron said Turkiye's local elections in March will test authorities' resolve in sticking with 40%-plus interest rates but that if they maintain course and foreign investors start returning, “that would point to positive momentum”.

Securing investment-grade status would see Oman's bonds added to the global fixed income indexes giant pension funds use like a shopping list and drive what analysts estimate could be US\$3 billion (RM14 billion) of inflows that would cut its borrowing costs.

Oman has been upgraded two years running, S&P's Frank Gill said, adding: “At the end of the day they are still very sensitive to the price of oil but tax revenue as a percentage of GDP is now over 31%, which is notable for a resource-driven economy.”

In contrast, Panama looks most in danger of dropping to “junk” as it goes through the painful process of shutting one of the world's biggest copper mines, which provides around 5% of its GDP.

Morgan Stanley has tipped a downgrade to happen around May when elections are due, and at BBB- with a negative outlook Fitch looks closest to doing the deed.

Italy's huge debts will keep it under scrutiny, while Spain, Germany and election-bound Britain still spend at least 4 percentage points of GDP more than pre-Covid.

S&P also expects to make a decision on whether to lower France from AA. “We are likely to resolve it (France's rating decision) by the end 2024,” Gill said. With debt-to-GDP expected stay at almost 110% in the coming years “we are watching to see if they deliver additional fiscal reforms”. – Reuters

How China talked the markets out of a run on the yuan

SINGAPORE: In recent months, China has sought to stabilise the yuan by orchestrating buying by state banks and giving market guidance to bankers.

The strategy of moral suasion marks a sharp break from Beijing's approach the last time the currency was on the ropes, in 2015.

Back then, the People's Bank of China (PBOC) resorted to official intervention as the central bank burned US\$1 trillion (RM4.6 trillion) in reserves to shore it up.

This year, as China's economy wobbled and money left the country, the PBOC took a starkly different approach, defending the currency by signalling to markets what kind of selling it would and would not tolerate.

Interviews with 28 market participants show at least two dozen cases where regulators closely and frequently steered market participants through a range of co-ordinated actions this year to resist strong downward pressure on the yuan.

The PBOC and State Administration of Foreign Exchange, the currency regulator, did not respond to Reuters' faxed questions about its approach. PBOC governor Pan Gongsheng has previously said regulators would prevent exchange rate overshooting risks and maintain stable FX market operations.

The strategy market participants and analysts described to Reuters has prevented a destabilising yuan slide.

However, they told Reuters that it has also chilled large parts of China's foreign exchange market, crashing trading volumes and raising questions about the yuan's chances of becoming a global reserve currency.

“The circumstances at the

moment are considerably more complicated because there are both domestic as well as global macroeconomic factors,” said Eswar Prasad, Tolani senior professor of international trade policy at Cornell University.

He described the PBOC's use of “non-standard measures to intervene in foreign exchange markets” as a form of “triage” to stop the yuan falling too rapidly.

As the currency of the world's second-largest economy and biggest exporter, the yuan's value determines the price of goods around the world and trillions of dollars in capital flows. It also serves as a barometer of China's challenges.

A Chinese forex regulator, speaking on condition of anonymity, said the currency's value was ultimately determined by fundamentals and currently a product of how “effectively China can thwart decoupling,” a reference to Western efforts to reduce economic reliance on China.

Ten traders interviewed by Reuters said key warnings first emerged in June when the PBOC's daily yuan guidance that determines its trading range for the day, known as the midpoint, started to diverge from market expectations.

In theory, the midpoint is based on contributions from 14 banks and referenced to the previous day's trade and overnight moves, which should make it easy for markets to predict.

By August, however, the midpoint's yawning deviation from trader estimates was read by the traders interviewed by Reuters as a signal the PBOC did not want the currency to go where markets were pushing it. – Reuters

Drugmakers set to raise prices on at least 500 drugs in the US

NEW YORK: Drugmakers including Pfizer, Sanofi and Takeda Pharmaceutical plan to raise prices in the US on more than 500 drugs in early January, according to data analysed by healthcare research firm 3 Axis Advisors.

Excluding different doses and formulations, more than 140 brands of drugs will have their prices raised next month, the data showed.

The expected price hikes come as the pharmaceutical industry gears up for the Biden Administration to publish significantly discounted prices for 10 high-cost drugs in September, and continues to contend with higher inflation and manufacturing costs.

Under President Joe Biden's Inflation Reduction Act (IRA), the government's Medicare health program can negotiate prices directly for some drugs starting in 2026.

Worries are also growing about fresh disruption to supply chains from a prolonged Middle East conflict, with shippers forced to halt or reroute traffic from the Red Sea, the world's main East-West trade route.

Three companies including GlaxoSmithKline, which last week said it would cut prices on some asthma, herpes and anti-epileptic drugs for 2024 are also expected to lower prices on at least 15 drugs in January, according to the data.

The cuts come after several companies have already announced price decreases for insulins earlier this year, in an effort to avoid penalties that could have been imposed under 2021's American Rescue Plan Act if they had kept prices high.

Under the law, drug companies are required to rebate the Medicaid program if price increases on medicines outpace inflation – and beginning in January 2024 those rebates could even be larger than the actual net cost of the drug.

“Every major former blockbuster



Price hikes come as pharmaceuticals gear up for Biden Administration to publish significantly discounted prices for 10 high-cost drugs in September, while continuing to face higher inflation and manufacturing costs. – UNSPLASH PIX

insulin is going to get thrown under the tires of this policy,” 3 Axis president Antonio Ciaccia said.

Truist analyst Robyn Karnauskas said in a note that Eli Lilly planned to lower the prices of its Humalog and Humulin insulins by 75.8% and 70% respectively on Dec 30, and to raise the price of its popular diabetes drug Mounjaro by 4.5% on Jan 1. These changes were not included in 3 Axis' data.

The changes are on list prices, which do not include rebates to pharmacy benefit managers and other discounts.

Drugmakers have largely kept increases at 10% or below – an industry practice followed by many big players since they came under fire for too many price hikes in the middle of the last decade.

Even high rates of inflation have not inspired drugmakers to speed up their price increases on already-launched products.

For at least the second year in a row, Pfizer has announced the most

January price increases, accounting for more than a quarter of all the drugs with hikes planned. The drugmaker will increase prices on 124 drugs, and put an additional increase on 22 drugs at its Hospira arm.

Excluding different doses and formulations, 30 and six branded drugs will have their prices raised by Pfizer and Hospira respectively.

Takeda-owned Baxalta said the second-highest number of price increases, with 53 hikes planned so far, followed by Belgian drugmaker UCB Pharma, which intends to raise prices on 40 unique drugs.

After different doses and formulations are discounted, eight branded drugs from Baxalta and six branded medicines from UCB will have their prices raised next month.

Sanofi, which pledged to cut 2024 prices on most of its prescribed insulin products earlier this year, notably will raise prices on its typhoid fever, rabies and yellow fever vaccines each by 9% in January. – Reuters

MARKET ROUND-UP: DECEMBER 29

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

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

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	10,823.70	-19.90
FBMKLCI	1,454.66	-2.75
CONSUMER PRODUCTS	553.68	-2.39
INDUSTRIAL PRODUCTS	172.99	+0.12
CONSTRUCTION	191.93	+0.59
FINANCIAL SERVICES	16,303.00	+5.52
ENERGY	817.73	-2.24
TELECOMMUNICATIONS	569.07	-3.23
HEALTH CARE	1,903.93	-4.88
TRANSPORTATION	930.39	+1.59
PROPERTY	862.11	-2.05
PLANTATION	7,007.96	-9.35
FBMSHA	10,988.70	-35.00
FBMACE	5,322.03	+50.28
TECHNOLOGY	63.39	-0.16
TURNOVER: 4.666 bil		VALUE: RM2.959 bil

Bursa likely to trend higher in the first week of 2024

KUALA LUMPUR: Bursa Malaysia is likely to trend higher in the first week of 2024 with a mild upside, to be driven by banking and technology stocks.

Inter-Pacific Asset Management Bhd chief economist and fund manager Datuk Nazri Khan expects the local market to trend between 1,450 and 1,460 next week with some bargain hunting likely to emerge.

"Furthermore, we see the year-end Christmas rally driven by feel-good factors and window dressing as well as overnight strength from Wall Street, coupled with signs that inflation has retreated and interest rate is expected to go down," he told Bernama.

He also noted that the trading volume had surged past four billion units and market breadth has been positive, therefore, the market could be bullish next week.

Looking ahead to 2024, Rakuten Trade equity research vice-president Thong Pak Leng said the brokerage firm holds a positive view on the performance of Malaysian equities, buoyed by the prospect that the US Federal Reserve is set to begin interest rate cuts and the return of foreign funds to the region.

"We anticipate the FTSE Bursa Malaysia (FBM KLCI) to linger around the 1,590 mark, based on the prevailing valuation premised on 2024 estimates, and could test the 1,650 level," he said.

For this week, he projects further upward potential if the FBM KLCI Index surpasses the 1,465-resistance line.

"As such, we expect the index to trend within the 1,450-1,470 range this week, with immediate support at 1,450 followed by 1,440," he said.

For the holiday-shortened week just ended, Bursa Malaysia traded mixed amid muted trading as investors continued to stay on the sidelines due to the holidays, amid mild bargain-hunting activities after the recent sell-off.

On a Friday-to-Friday basis, the FBM KLCI rose marginally by 0.28 of-a-point to end the week at 1,454.66 versus 1,454.38 a week ago.

On the index board, the FBM Emas Shariah Index lost 27.86 points to 10,988.71, the FBM 70 Index fell 3.86 points to 14,612.98, while the FBM ACE Index went up 105.83 points to 5,322.03, the FBM Emas Index gained 3.78 points to 10,823.70, and the FBMT 100 Index was 0.79 of-a-point better at 10,485.72.

Sector-wise, the Industrial Products and Services Index inched up 0.23 of-a-point to 172.99, the Financial Services Index added 55.95 points to 16,303.04, while the Energy Index slid 0.87 of-a-point to 817.73 and the Plantation Index shed 28.49 points to 7,007.96.

Bursa Malaysia ended the week with a lower turnover of 15.11 billion units worth RM9.38 billion versus 18.39 billion units worth RM12.04 billion in the preceding week.

The Main Market volume shrank to 9.41 billion shares valued at RM8.10 billion against 10.75 billion shares valued at RM10.40 billion in the previous week.

Top 20 Actives				
STOCKS	VOLUME ('00)	CLOSING (RM)	+/- (RM)	+/- (%)
GOCEAN	2,608,736	+0.225	+0.100	+80.00
PELIKAN	1,715,321	+0.280	-0.055	-16.42
DATAPRP	1,308,762	+0.170	+0.015	+9.68
MINETEC	1,146,624	+0.145	-0.005	-3.33
CIMB	1,017,088	+5.850	+0.010	+0.17
HONGSENG	962,023	+0.025	-	-
GOCEAN-WB	888,593	+0.065	+0.045	+225.00
PUC	846,015	+0.040	-0.005	-11.11
BPURI	792,627	+0.085	+0.005	+6.25
LEFORM	716,274	+0.440	+0.015	+3.53
SCABLE	683,713	+0.375	-0.025	-6.25
WIDAD	681,644	+0.485	+0.005	+1.04
DGB	630,373	+0.155	+0.045	+40.91
XOX	613,130	+0.015	-	-
HSI-CTJ	602,400	+0.055	-0.005	-8.33
BENALEC	588,385	+0.145	+0.045	+45.00
SCIB	496,243	+0.935	+0.015	+1.63
TOPGLOV	465,857	+0.900	-0.010	-1.10
TWL-LA	441,244	+0.025	-0.005	-16.67
SMTRACK	422,433	+0.050	-	-



Top 20 Gainers (By RM)			
STOCKS	CLOSING (RM)	+/- (RM)	VOLUME ('00)
DLADY	23.160	+0.360	368
KESM	7.070	+0.220	44
ALLIANZ	18.440	+0.200	281
ALLIANZ-PA	19.000	+0.200	40
PBA	1.460	+0.180	87,803
PMBTECH	2.780	+0.160	7,153
BIPORT	5.140	+0.140	1
AMWAY	5.880	+0.130	517
ANALABS	1.660	+0.130	1,442
BKAWAN	20.600	+0.120	15
UMCCA	5.060	+0.110	736
GOCEAN	0.225	+0.100	2,608,736
HLCAP	4.550	+0.100	7,842
MPI	28.200	+0.100	1,975
PIE	3.250	+0.100	1,422
CRESNDO	2.320	+0.090	6,585
CITAGLB-WB	0.775	+0.080	191
HLBANK	18.900	+0.080	14,467
KOTRA	4.830	+0.080	142
F&N	28.160	+0.060	415

Top 20 Gainers (By %)			
STOCKS	CLOSING (RM)	+/- (%)	VOLUME ('00)
GOCEAN-WB	0.065	+225.00	888,593
APPASIA-WB	0.010	+100.00	17,983
GOCEAN	0.225	+80.00	2,608,736
TAWIN-PA	0.025	+66.67	800
BORNOIL	0.015	+50.00	72,502
FAST-WA	0.045	+50.00	20,223
FOCUS	0.015	+50.00	109,561
JOE-WB	0.015	+50.00	5,723
MLAB	0.015	+50.00	24,660
PDZ-WC	0.015	+50.00	8,820
SINARAN-WB	0.030	+50.00	56,961
BENALEC	0.145	+45.00	588,385
DGB	0.155	+40.91	630,373
A50CHIN-CD	0.020	+33.33	100
GIIB-WA	0.020	+33.33	2,210
PASUKGB-WA	0.020	+33.33	19,582
PNEPCB-WA (S)	0.020	+33.33	7,534
PUC-WA (S)	0.020	+33.33	787
SERSOL-WB (S)	0.060	+33.33	252
BTM-WC (S)	0.025	+25.00	2

World Stocks/Commodities			
INDEX	CLOSING	DAILY CHANGE	DAILY CHANGE (%)
DJIA (US)	37,689.54	-20.56	-0.05%
S&P 500 (US)	4,769.83	-13.52	-0.28%
NASDAQ (US)	15,011.35	-83.79	-0.56%
NYSE (US)	16,852.89	-37.69	-0.22%
EURO STOXX 50 (EUR)	4,521.65	+7.27	+0.16%
FTSE 100 (UK)	7,733.24	+10.50	+0.14%
DAX (GER)	16,751.64	+50.09	+0.30%
NIKKEI 225 (JPN)	33,464.17	-75.45	-0.22
TOPIX (JPN)	2,366.39	+4.37	+0.19
HANG SENG INDEX (HK)	17,047.39	+3.86	+0.02
CSI 300 (CHN)	3,431.11	+16.57	+0.49
SH SE COM (CHN)	2,974.94	+20.23	+0.68
KOSPI INDEX (SK)	2,655.28	+41.78	+1.60
MSCI ASIA PACIFIC	169.37	+2.13	+1.27
ASX 200 (AUS)	7,590.82	-23.46	-0.31
ALL ORDINARIES INDX (AUS)	7,829.49	-22.59	-0.29
SENSEX INDEX (IND)	72,240.25	-170.13	-0.23
FBM KLCI	1,454.66	-2.75	-0.19
STRAITS TIMES INDEX (S'PORE)	3,240.27	+25.87	+0.80
WTI (US\$/BBL.)	71.65	-0.12	-0.17%
BRENT (US\$/BBL.)	77.04	-0.11	-0.14%
GOLD (COMEX) (US\$/T OZ)	2,071.80	-11.70	-0.56%
SILVER (COMEX) (US\$/T OZ)	24.09	-0.29	-1.17%
PLATINUM (US\$/T OZ)	991.90	-15.37	-1.53%
COPPER (COMEX) (US CENTS/LB.)	389.05	-3.40	-0.87%
COPPER 3MO (LME) (US\$/MT)	8,559	-65.50	-0.76%
CORN (US CENTS/BU.)	471.25	-3.00	-0.63%
WHEAT (US CENTS/BU.)	628.00	-3.50	-0.55%
SOYBEAN OIL (CBOT) (US CENTS/LB.)	48.18	+0.20	+0.42%
COCOA (ICE) (US\$/MT)	4,196.00	-60.00	-1.41%
RUBBER (S'PORE) (US CENTS/KG)	154.20	+2.60	+1.72%

as at 5pm, Dec 29

Top 20 Losers (By RM)			
STOCKS	CLOSING (RM)	+/- (RM)	VOLUME ('00)
NESTLE	117.600	-1.400	719
RAPID	28.480	-0.460	2,211
IMASPRO	3.830	-0.190	11,642
PPB	14.480	-0.100	6,418
PETDAG	21.840	-0.080	2,539
PETGAS	17.400	-0.080	16,376
AJI	15.900	-0.060	459
D&O	3.620	-0.060	8,903
ECA	0.505	-0.060	249,225
MSM	1.610	-0.060	12,891
SCIENTX	3.810	-0.060	2,145
UNIMECH	1.770	-0.060	27
UTDPLT	17.800	-0.060	3,105
HSI-HPM	0.670	-0.055	220
PELIKAN	0.280	-0.055	1,715,321
CDB	4.080	-0.050	19,717
GCB	1.830	-0.050	15,341
HUMEIND	2.250	-0.050	9,138
PCHEM (S)	7.16	-0.050	31,031
UWC (S)	3.520	-0.050	10,410

Top 20 Losers (By %)			
STOCKS	CLOSING (RM)	+/- (%)	VOLUME ('00)
TWL-WD	0.005	-50.00	2,000
TWL-WE	0.005	-50.00	6
VS-WB	0.005	-50.00	6,897
ZENTECH-WB	0.005	-50.00	4,732
MAGNUM-C8	0.015	-40.00	2,800
BSLCORP-WA	0.010	-33.33	14,785
MEITUAN-C21	0.010	-33.33	130
VELESTO-WA	0.010	-33.33	40,293
WCT-C22	0.055	-26.67	110
MTRONIC	0.015	-25.00	264,243
TALAMT	0.015	-25.00	12,030
EITA-WA	0.040	-20.00	285,218
ITRONIC-WA (S)	0.020	-20.00	9,459
PRELEXUS-WB (S)	0.045	-18.18	11,590
BPURI-WB (S)	0.050	-16.67	1,050
CHEETAH-WA (S)	0.025	-16.67	1,330
FBMKLCI-CIZ	0.050	-16.67	3,525
G3 (S)	0.025	-16.67	43,926
MQTECH (S)	0.025	-16.67	24,480
SAUDEE (S)	0.025	-16.67	33,677

MARKETS/FROM THE BROKERS

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

Compiled by SunBiz Team

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Kenanga neutral on construction

KENANGA Research has kept a NEUTRAL rating on the building material sector with selective stock picks including ferrosilicon (FeSi) and silicon manganese (SiMn) alloy producer OMH (OP; TP: RM2.07) and cable support system maker ULICORP (OP; TP: RM2.18).

"We project a slightly higher average aluminium price of US\$2,450 (RM11,257) /MT in CY24 vs an estimated US\$2,262 (RM /MT in CY23, while slightly lower average FeSi and SiMn prices of US\$1,350(RM10,393)/MT and US\$950 (RM4,365)/MT in CY24 vs an estimated US\$1,450 (RM6,662)/MT and US\$968 (RM4,447)/MT in CY23, respectively.

"We sift out OMH as our top sector pick as we believe the selloff on the stock has overshot its fundamentals, particularly, it being a low-carbon producer fuelled by hydropower. We also see a bright spot in cable support system maker ULICORP (OP; TP: RM2.18) on the back of a construction boom driven by both private-sector building jobs and the impending rollout of mega public infrastructure projects," it said in its note.

It recommends OMH given its: (i) its structural cost advantage over international peers given its access to low-cost hydropower under a 20-year contract ending 2033; (ii) its strong growth prospects underpinned by plans to expand its capacity by 30%-36% to 610,000-640,000 tonnes per annum over the medium term; and (iii) its appeal to investor given its clean energy source.

It recommends ULICORP given: (i) the strong demand for its cable support system products on the back of a construction boom in private space and impending public mega projects; (ii) improved pricing power of players following the industry consolidation during the pandemic; and (iii) its growth driven by two new plants that will boost its capacity by 40%. (Dec 29, 2023)

Ringgit likely to continue uptrend against US dollar

KUALA LUMPUR: The ringgit is likely to continue its uptrend against the US dollar this week, trading between the 4.57 and 4.58 level for the first week of 2024 on US interest rate cut expectations as early as March 2024, said an analyst.

Bank Muamalat Malaysia Bhd chief economist Dr Mohd Afzanizam Abdul Rashid said the focus will be on the US Nonfarm Payroll (NFP) and the Federal Open Market Committee (FOMC) minutes to be released on Thursday.

"This will provide further clues on the potential US rate cuts in 2024. We believe the ringgit will attempt to break its immediate support of RM4.5778 as the rate cut narrative gains further strength. "Should that happen, the next support level will be located at RM4.5104," he told Bernama.

SPI Asset Management managing director Stephen Innes said the market is pricing in an additional 150 basis points (bps) of rate cuts in March 2024 versus the US Federal Reserve's (Fed) 75 bps in the second half.

"That is the biggest issue in foreign exchange (forex) markets right now. This debate will be resolved when we get the first US NFP to be released in early January.

"A strong print could push back the Fed's rate cut expectations while a soft print could almost certainly cement a March cut and weaken the US dollar precipitously," he said.

Innes expects the ringgit to move to 4.50 in the first half of 2024 against US dollar. As for this week, gains could be limited to 4.58 ahead of the early-year release of the US NFP.

For the week just ended, the local note traded higher on positive sentiment in anticipation of a US rate cut in 2024. On a Friday-to-Friday basis, the ringgit was firmer against the

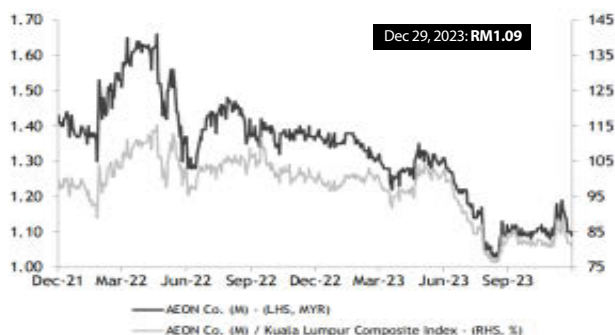
Exchange Rates

FOREIGN CURRENCY	SELLING TT/OD	BUYING TT	BUYING OD
1 US Dollar	4.664	4.528	4.518
1 Australian Dollar	3.206	3.078	3.062
1 Brunei Dollar	3.534	3.431	3.423
1 Canadian Dollar	3.524	3.429	3.417
1 Euro	5.174	5.004	4.984
1 New Zealand Dollar	2.970	2.860	2.844
1 Singapore Dollar	3.534	3.431	3.423
1 Sterling Pound	5.938	5.751	5.731
1 Swiss Franc	5.508	5.381	5.366
100 UAE Dirham	128.530	121.830	121.630
100 Bangladesh Taka	4.332	4.048	3.848
100 Chinese Renminbi	66.080	63.270	N/A
100 Danish Krone	71.140	65.450	65.250
100 Hongkong Dollar	60.360	57.350	57.150
100 Indian Rupee	5.700	5.350	5.150
100 Indonesian Rupiah	0.031	0.028	0.023
100 Japanese Yen	3.292	3.189	3.179
100 New Taiwan Dollar	N/A	N/A	N/A
100 Norwegian Krone	47.010	43.220	43.020
100 Pakistan Rupee	1.680	1.570	1.370
100 Philippine Peso	8.510	8.020	7.820
100 Qatar Riyal	129.490	122.920	122.720
100 Saudi Riyal	125.790	119.420	119.220
100 South Africa Rand	26.020	23.490	23.290
100 Sri Lanka Rupee	1.470	1.360	1.160
100 Swedish Krona	48.240	43.890	43.690
100 Thai Baht	14.220	12.600	12.200

Source: Malayan Banking Bhd/Bernama

Aeon Co (M) Bhd

BUY. TARGET PRICE: RM1.60



Source: Maybank IBG Research

AEON Co (M) Bhd (AEON) has implemented a group-wide sustainability and climate change policy with clear outlines to support its environmental, social and governance (ESG) goals.

AEON's overall ESG score is above average at 56 (out of 100) under Maybank IBG's proprietary ESG scoring methodology.

The group does not provide GHG emission breakdowns of (scope 1, 2 and 3), but has identified key areas of environmental concern to address within its internal sustainability policy.

Maybank IBG Research has a BUY call on Aeon and an unchanged TP of RM1.60 (19x FY24E PER, mean).

The research house maintains the earnings estimates.

"Consumer spending is expected to remain subdued in the near-term but we believe that AEON's sequential earnings could improve with seasonally higher retail festive spending and shopping mall footfall.

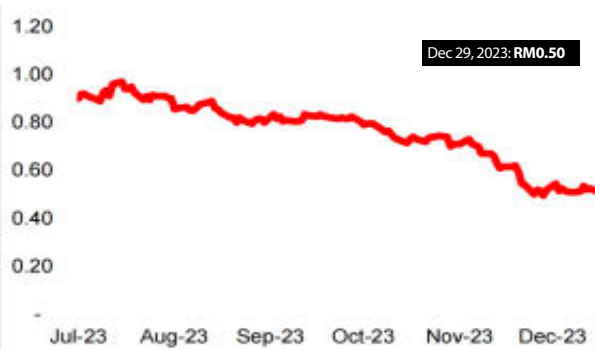
"Challenges within its retail segment could also be partially buffered by stronger property management services performance from higher occupancy rates as consumer preferences shift back towards shopping malls post-pandemic," it said in its note.

Energy consumption at its standalone retail stores and shopping malls form the largest part of AEON's carbon footprint. Aeon has completed its transition from conventional to LED lighting in its malls and stores to achieve carbon neutrality by 2040. It has installed solar panels to transition towards using renewable energy, and has also devised ways to lower waste production.

The group works with non-governmental organisations (NGOs) to donate excess food items to those in need. Aeon has implemented a zero plastic bag campaign at its retail stores on Jan 1, 2023. (Dec 29, 2023)

ECA Integrated Solution Bhd

OUTPERFORM. TARGET PRICE: RM0.73



Source: PublicInvest Research

ECA Integrated Solution Bhd (ECA) ended FY23 with core earnings of RM10.8 million, up 21.3% YoY, led by stronger contributions from both integrated production systems and standalone automated equipment segments.

Despite the stronger finish, the results were below PublicInvest Research's full-year expectations, making up only 74%.

The research house attributed the weaker-than-expected results due to slower spending by the end customers especially in the semiconductor and automotive segments in the final quarter as well as higher selling and administrative expenses.

During the final quarter (Q4FY23), sales tumbled 40.5% y-o-y. Revenue contracted from RM7.9 million to RM4.7 million, dragged by weaker sales from Integrated Production System and Standalone Automation Equipment segments. The Group made only a small profit of RM14,000 compared to RM2.9 million for the same period a year ago. Gross margin fell from 56.4% to 29.7%, attributed to changes made to the product mix at a later stage and a rise in the selling and administrative expenses.

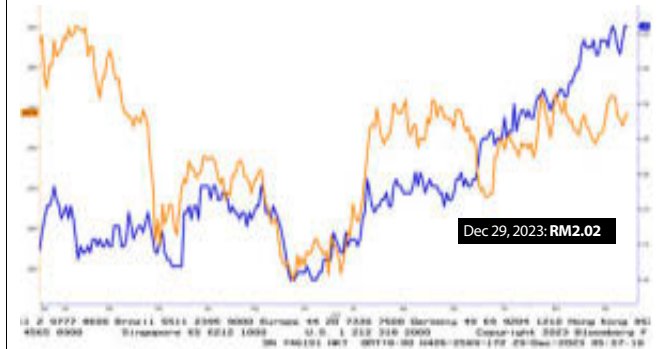
Of the RM25.5 million raised from the listing exercise, ECA has fully utilised the proceeds.

Its management expects the current slowdown in global semiconductor to persist until the first half of 2024 before seeing a recovery in growth. To mitigate the risk exposure, the group aims to diversify through the introduction of innovative products, while concurrently emphasising the improvement of operational efficiency and the expansion of market size.

The research house has maintained OUTPERFORM with a lower TP of RM0.73 (previously RM1.12) as it believes that the poor financial performance has been fully reflected in the current share price. (Dec 29, 2023)

Kim Loong Resources Bhd

BUY. TARGET PRICE: RM2.23



Source: TA Research

DESPITE plunging average crude palm oil (CPO) selling price, Kim Loong Resources Berhad's (KLRB) has posted excellent third quarter results 2024 (Q3'24).

KLRB's core net profit increased by 31.5% y-o-y to RM47.2 million on the back of an 11.5% rise in revenue.

The group has declared a special single-tier dividend of 3.0 sen per share for the quarter under review.

TA Research said KLRB's 3QFY24 results exceeded its expectations, and the deviation was due to its higher-than-expected margins.

For the first nine months of the financial year 2024 (9M'24), core earnings fell 2.2% y-o-y to RM75.2 million in tandem with a 21.4% plunge in revenue.

Despite higher fresh fruit bunch (FFB) production growth of 19.5%, KLRB's 9M'24 operating profit declined 20.5% y-o-y to RM92.4 million. The weak results were dragged by a lower FFB selling price, down 27.3% y-o-y to an average of RM718 per tonne. Notwithstanding lower revenue (-21.3% y-o-y), 9M'24 operating profit of its milling business increased by 13.4% y-o-y to RM92.5 million, thanks to better processing margins.

Its management expects the FY24 FFB harvest to increase by 15% y-o-y as more replanted areas reach maturity and the age profile of young palms improves. For the milling operations, the total processing quantity is expected to be at least 1.5 million metric tonnes of FFB for FY24.

The research house has upgraded KLRB to BUY from HOLD, raising the target price of KLRB to RM2.23/share based on 16x CY24 EPS. It tweaks its FY24 and FY25 earnings forecasts by 14.4% and 16.5%, respectively, and introduces its FY26 earnings forecast of RM130.2 million for the group. (Dec 29, 2023)



the Sun **LYFE**

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WEEKLY FOCUS

MONDAY

Discover cutting-edge world of Gaming and Tech

TUESDAY

Ultimate guide to Travel and Leisure

WEDNESDAY

Latest in Fashion and Beauty sense

THURSDAY

Inside the world of Social Media Influencers

FRIDAY

Culinary delights and Beverage trends

Game on 2024

Top masterpieces of 2023 - P22

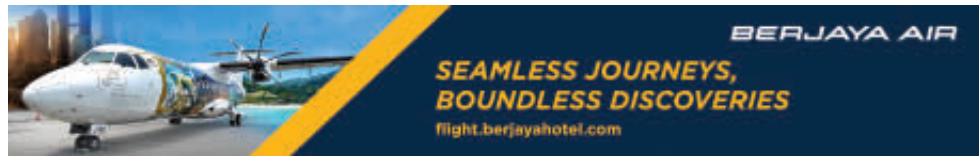
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Looking at last year's best. - YOUTUBE



Top of the game

► *theSun* takes a look at some of the masterpieces from last year

BY MARK MATHEN VICTOR

EMBARK on a thrilling journey through the annals of gaming history and delve deep into the top masterpieces that defined the gaming landscape in 2023.

As we bid farewell to the bygone year and embrace the new one, we find ourselves captivated by the unparalleled experiences offered by these three remarkable titles.

From heart-pounding horror to death-defying missions, the gaming scene of 2023 has left an indelible mark, setting new standards of creativity and pleasure in the industry.

Resident Evil 4 Remake

Our odyssey begins with the iconic *Resident Evil 4 Remake*, available on PlayStation 4, PlayStation 5, Xbox Series X/S, PC, iOS and iPadOS. The original *Resident Evil 4*, a beloved classic from the mid-2000s, set a benchmark for action survival games.

However, the 2023 remake has surpassed all expectations, proving to be a testament to the essence of what a remake should embody.

This reimagined masterpiece not only enhances the elements that made the original captivating but elevates the entire gaming



Fighting the forces of Hell in *Diablo IV* is massive fun. - BLIZZARD ENTERTAINMENT

In *The Legend of Zelda: Tears of the Kingdom*, the only limit is your fantasy. - NINTENDO

experience to unprecedented heights.

The thrill of confronting zombies is intensified and the game successfully preserves the campy humour and self-awareness that made the storyline ludicrously entertaining.

Resident Evil 4 Remake stands as a shining example of how a remake can breathe new life into a classic, captivating both fans of the original and newcomers alike.



Take a European vacation in *Resident Evil 4*, where the villagers are crazy and cults roam the countryside. - CAPCOM

Diablo IV

Transitioning to the realm of demonic battles and loot-collecting adventures, *Diablo IV* beckons players on PlayStation 4, PlayStation 5, Xbox One, Xbox Series X/S and PC.

Offering a perfect gaming loop, *Diablo IV* invites players to embark on a journey where they create characters, vanquish demons, collect loot, grow stronger and repeat — an enticing formula that never loses its allure.

Diverging from the comical tone of its predecessor, *Diablo IV*'s narrative recaptures the grim atmosphere reminiscent of *Diablo II: Lord of Destruction*, harkening back to the franchise's roots.

While the game experiences a drop in intensity post-story completion, Blizzard's commitment to ongoing improvement through a long-term plan will further instill confidence in players.

Diablo IV not only satisfies the hunger for a captivating gameplay loop but also promises a sustained evolution that keeps the demonic adventure fresh and engaging.

The Legend of Zelda: Tears of the Kingdom

Our journey concludes with *The Legend of Zelda: Tears of the Kingdom*, an enchanting adventure exclusively on the Nintendo Switch.

Following the groundbreaking success of *The Legend of Zelda: Breath of the Wild* in 2017, *Tears of the Kingdom* faced the formidable challenge of meeting the high standards set by its predecessor.

Remarkably, *Tears of the Kingdom* not only meets but surpasses these expectations, delivering a spectacular experience even on the ageing Nintendo Switch console.

The game's launch witnessed a flood of social media content showcasing players' creativity with the in-game Zonai system. This innovative feature expanded the game's possibilities, allowing players to build intricate contraptions and redefine how the game could be enjoyed.

Beyond its technical achievements, *Tears of the Kingdom* exemplifies a diverse and individualised gaming experience.

The vibrant community response on social media underscores the collective satisfaction of players, showcasing a shared excitement for the future direction Nintendo takes with the series.

As we reflect on these gaming masterpieces, it becomes evident that 2023 has not merely been a year of releases but a celebration of gaming evolution.

Each title explored here contributes to the rich tapestry of gaming history, leaving an indelible mark on the industry. As we anticipate what the future holds for gaming, these three gems stand as pillars of excellence, inspiring both seasoned players and newcomers alike.

In closing, the year 2023 has offered a treasure trove of gaming delights and these masterpieces invite us to savour the boundless creativity and pleasure they bring.

Whether you find yourself immersed in the horrors of *Resident Evil 4 Remake*, battling demons in the relentless world of *Diablo IV* or embarking on a fantastical journey in *Tears of the Kingdom*, the year's gaming landscape has been nothing short of extraordinary.

Here is to a new year filled with even more awe-inspiring adventures and the promise of gaming wonders yet to come. Keep those fingers active and twiddling!



Like a Dragon: Infinite Wealth – SEGA



Tekken 8 – BANDAI NAMCO



Granblue Fantasy: Relink – CYGAMES

Next gaming chapter unfolds

BY ACE EMERSON

As the calendar turns, we extend a hearty welcome to the gaming adventures that await in 2024. The horizon is aglow with the promise of captivating experiences, spanning platforms from PC and the robust consoles of the PS5 and Xbox One Series X to the versatile Nintendo Switch.

Join us on a journey through the upcoming year as we explore the diverse tapestry of gaming wonders set to unfold across different realms.

The gaming landscape of 2024 promises to be nothing short of extraordinary, with a diverse lineup of releases that cater to every gaming palate. In this compilation, we present an overview of the most anticipated games for the new year, listed in chronological order where release dates are available.

Dive into the excitement as we explore the gaming wonders that await in this year of the dragon.

Prince of Persia: The Lost Crown

Platform(s): PS5, PS4, Xbox Series X, Xbox One, PC, Nintendo Switch

Release date: January 18, 2024

Embark on a new platformer adventure with *Prince of Persia: The Lost Crown*, crafted by the esteemed team behind *Rayman Legends*. Set in the Persian-inspired world of Mount Qaf, players will unravel secrets, rescue the Prince, and wield Time Powers in an immersive side-scrolling experience.

Brace yourself for a visually stunning journey and dynamic gameplay that breathes new life into the classic series.

Like a Dragon: Infinite Wealth

Platform(s): PS5, PS4, Xbox Series X, Xbox One, PC

Release date: January 26, 2024

Venturing into uncharted territory, *Like a Dragon: Infinite Wealth* takes the acclaimed series to the United States. Promising a larger-than-life RPG experience, the game introduces Kasuga Ichiban and Kazuma Kiryu to unexpected events in a narrative filled with surprises.

With a reveal trailer featuring Ichiban awakening on an American beach, players can anticipate an intriguing blend of humour and unpredictability.

Tekken 8

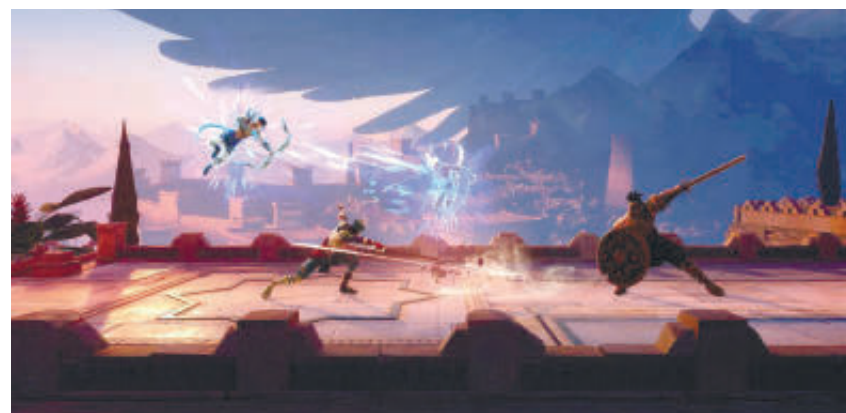
Platform(s): Xbox Series X, PS5, PC

Release date: January 26, 2024

Tekken 8 emerges with a revamped look, powered by the Unreal Engine. Centering on the father-son dynamic between Kazuya Mishima and Jin Kazama, the game delves into the lore teased in *Tekken 7*.

Featuring the innovative Heat System, players can strategically harness aggression to enhance character strengths, promising a thrilling combat experience. Brace yourself for the next evolution in the iconic fighting franchise.

➤ Sneak peek into the year's most anticipated releases



Prince of Persia: The Lost Crown – UBISOFT

Granblue Fantasy: Relink

Platform(s): PS4, PS5, PC

Release date: February 1, 2024

From the creative minds at Cygames comes *Granblue Fantasy: Relink*, an action-RPG designed for cooperative play with up to four players. Set in the captivating *Granblue Fantasy* universe, players can expect magical landscapes, striking character designs and very intense combat.

Immerse yourself in a fantastical world where teamwork and strategy are key to overcoming challenges.

Persona 3: Reload

Platform(s): Xbox Series X, Xbox One, PC, PS5, PS4

Release date: February 2, 2024

Persona 3: Reload revitalises the RPG classic for the modern era, featuring a revamped battle system, new English voiceovers, and more. While embracing modern improvements, Atlus maintains the essence of the original with a revamped experience that captivates both nostalgic fans and newcomers.

Prepare for a journey into the intriguing world of *Persona* with enhanced visuals and immersive storytelling.

Suicide Squad: Kill the Justice League

Platform(s): PS5, Xbox Series X, PC

Release date: February 2, 2024

Suicide Squad: Kill the Justice League invites players to step into the chaotic shoes of semi-heroes like *Harley Quinn*, *King Shark*, *Deadshot*, or *Captain Boomerang*.

Set in the *Batman: Arkham* universe, this installment promises a continuation of previous games' storylines, offering both solo and cooperative gameplay. As the release date approaches, fans can anticipate the unfolding of existing narrative threads and the introduction of new, unexpected twists.

Helldivers 2

Platform(s): PS5, PC

Release date: February 8, 2024

The sequel to the 2015 twin-stick

shooter, *Helldivers 2*, promises a gripping third-person shooter experience. Developed by Arrowhead, players face off against bug-like alien creatures with advanced technology, reminiscent of *Starship Troopers*.

Prepare for intense cooperative battles as you navigate challenging environments and engage in exhilarating combat.

Banishers: Ghosts of New Eden

Platform(s): PC, PS5, Xbox Series X

Release date: February 13, 2024

Dontnod, known for *Life is Strange* and *Vampyr*, unveils a new action-RPG, *Banishers: Ghosts of New Eden*. Set in the frozen wilderness of North America in 1695, players follow ghost hunters Antea Duarte and Red Mac Rait.

Expect a rich world, spooky cases to solve, and challenging decisions that shape the course of your ghost-hunting journey.

Skull and Bones

Platform(s): PS5, Xbox Series X, PC

Release date: February 16, 2024

In the expansive seas, *Skull and Bones* sets sail, offering a realistic take on pirate battles. Developed by the team behind *Assassin's Creed: Black Flag*, the game features solo campaigns and intense player-versus-player ship skirmishes online.

Navigate the 18th-century waters of the Indian Ocean, encountering supernatural elements such as the colossal tentacles of a terrifying kraken.

Nightingale

Platform(s): PC

Release date: February 22, 2024

From former BioWare boss Aaryn Flynn comes *Nightingale*, a shared-world survival game set in a Victorian fantasy setting. Play solo or join forces with friends and other players in this intriguing survival adventure.

As testing is set to go live in the coming year, players can anticipate a unique gaming experience that combines survival elements with a captivating Victorian aesthetic.



Persona 3: Reload – SEGA



Suicide Squad: Kill the Justice League – WARNER



Helldivers 2 – ARROWHEAD



Banishers: Ghosts of New Eden – FOCUS ENTERTAINMENT



Skull and Bones – UBISOFT



Nightingale – INFLEXION GAMES



SCAN ME

BY HAZIQUE ZAIRILL

THE London-based tech innovator Nothing has made waves in the tech scene with its groundbreaking device, the Nothing Phone (2). Adding to its repertoire, the brand introduces CMF by Nothing, a sub-brand focused on “colour, material and finish”, offering a more budget-friendly avenue for consumer tech.

The commitment to democratising great design in a historically overlooked market segment is emphasised by a co-founder, underscoring the independence of the CMF team in a recent Community Update video.

The video assures that the team remains focused on core product development, aligning with Nothing’s design ethos of being bold, simple, and original. In their journey so far, CMF has successfully introduced three innovative products: the Buds Pro, Watch Pro and Power 65W GaN.

To assess the efficacy of each product in achieving its objectives, we conducted in-depth reviews and hands-on testing.

CMF Watch Pro

Making an impactful entry into the smartwatch arena, the CMF Watch Pro sports a square design reminiscent of the Apple Watch, sparking comparisons. With a glossy aluminium alloy body and a 1.96-inch square AMOLED display, it achieves a peak brightness of 600 nits, ensuring vibrant visuals.

The sleek design features a single home button for control, and unlike the Apple Watch, there is no digital crown; instead, control is solely via the touchscreen and button.



Nothing unleashes CMF. -PICS BY CMF.

Innovation within reach

➤ Affordable designs aligned with hi-tech chic

This smartwatch boasts built-in GPS, heart rate, and SpO2 sensors for comprehensive health tracking, complemented by an IP68 rating for water and dust resistance.

A standout feature for sports enthusiasts is its 110 sports modes and GPS capabilities. Running on custom software, it bridges a gap in Nothing’s portfolio addressing the absence of a smartwatch.

Packing a 340mAh battery, the Watch Pro impressively lasts almost 11 days with regular use and Bluetooth connectivity. Practical features like speakers and a microphone, customisable watch faces, weather updates and app notifications enhance its appeal.

Each smartwatch is accompanied by its own dedicated application, and the CMF Watch app, accessible on both Android and iOS, efficiently manages the pairing and synchronisation of data from the smartwatch.



CMF Watch Pro marks CMF’s first foray into the smartwatch market.



The CMF Buds Pro comes in three colours.



CMF Power 65W GaN.

The connectivity with smartphones is smooth and user-friendly. The watch includes a USB cable that attaches magnetically, but it is essential to note that a USB charger is not provided.

Available in metallic grey with a distinctive orange strap and dark grey, the CMF Watch Pro is priced at just RM339.

CMF Buds Pro

The CMF Buds Pro, housed in a circular case, take a departure from Nothing’s transparent aesthetic for a more straightforward design. Equipped with LCP and polyurethane diaphragms and high-tension copper-clad aluminium wires, they deliver superior vocal clarity and powerful bass.

These earbuds stand out with active noise cancellation, surpassing the Ear (2) at 45dB, filtering

frequencies up to 5,000Hz and incorporating a transparency mode.

A remarkable feature is the impressive battery life, offering 11 hours of playback per earbud on a single charge (with ANC off), extending to a combined 39 hours with the included charging case.

Additionally, the Fast Charge feature provides five hours of listening with just 10 minutes of charging. Just like other Nothing earbuds, the CMF Buds Pro can be connected to your phone through the Nothing X app, accessible on both Android and iOS.

This app enables customisation of touch controls, switching between ANC levels, adjusting the equaliser and activating Low Lag Mode — an appreciated feature for audiophiles keen on customising their EQ and personalising their sound preferences.

The buds are available in three colours, which are dark grey, light grey and signature orange, priced at RM239.

CMF Power 65W GaN

Lastly, the Power 65W GaN charger by CMF. This charger is equipped with two USB-C ports capable of delivering the full 65W and one USB-A port with a more than decent maximum output of 36W.

The CMF Power 65W GaN charger stands out as a compact charging brick, utilising gallium nitride (GaN) as a semiconductor material, resulting in faster charging speeds and a more compact size compared to traditional chargers.

This charger is versatile and suitable for charging various devices, including phones, tablets, earbuds and notebooks.

It is compatible with MFI-certified cables, ensuring optimal performance across a range of tech products.



The Bartlett-directed psychological thriller is produced by Rogen. - PICS COURTESY OF LIONSGATE

BY HAZIQUE ZAIRILL

THE much-anticipated trailer for *Miller's Girl*, a psychological thriller featuring Jenna Ortega and Martin Freeman, has finally been unveiled, offering a tantalising glimpse into the mysterious narrative meticulously crafted by director and writer Jade Halley Bartlett.

At the heart of the story is Cairo Sweet, brilliantly portrayed by Ortega, a gifted female student intricately entwined in a complex relationship with her teacher, Jonathan Miller, played by the Emmy-winning Freeman.

The catalyst for this intriguing connection is Miller's assignment for Cairo to create a short story inspired by her beloved author.

While the initial tension between the esteemed teacher and the skilled student is subtle, the trailer tantalisingly hints at an impending escalation, promising a rollercoaster of gripping psychological twists.

Miller's Girl stands as another compelling chapter in Ortega's dynamic career, following

Cinematic treat

Ortega and Freeman to lead psychological thriller

her standout role in the *Scream* franchise alongside Melissa Barrera.

Audiences can also relish her performance in the action-packed drama *Finestkind*, which premiered on Paramount Plus Dec 15 of the previous year.

Furthermore, Ortega is poised to join an illustrious cast, including Michael Keaton, Catherine O'Hara, Winona Ryder and Willem Dafoe, in the highly anticipated *Beetlejuice 2*, which recently completed filming.

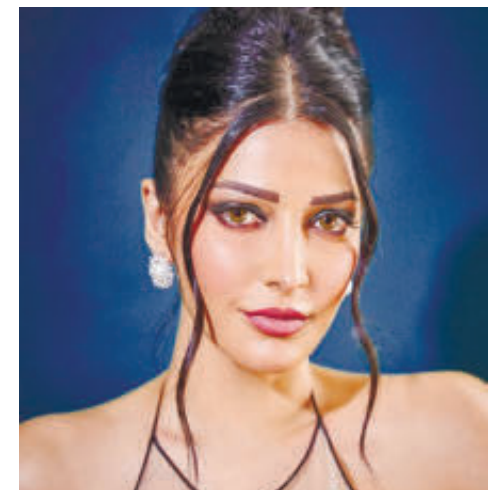
In this psychological thriller, Ortega shares the screen with the seasoned Emmy-winning actor Freeman, alongside a talented supporting cast featuring Dagmara

Dominczyk, Bashir Salahuddin alongside Gideon Adlon.

Behind the scenes, the film boasts a stellar production team, including producers Seth Rogen, Evan Goldberg, James Weaver, Josh Fagen and Mary-Margaret Kunze.

Scheduled for an exclusive theatrical release on Jan 26, *Miller's Girl* promises to captivate audiences with its intricate storytelling, nuanced performances and the suspenseful allure of the psychological thriller genre.

As Ortega continues to diversify her roles, this film stands as a testament to her growing prominence in the entertainment industry.



Haasan's inspiring sobriety revelation. - INSTAGRAM

Haasan breaks silence on sobriety

ACTRESS Shruti Haasan, the daughter of renowned actor Kamal Haasan, has revealed a surprising chapter of her past, acknowledging that alcohol played a significant role in her life. However, the actress proudly shared that she has maintained sobriety for the past eight years.

While Haasan admitted to a desire for drinking with friends, she clarified that she was never involved with drugs. "I was never into drugs, but alcohol was a big thing in my life," she candidly stated.

Having achieved eight years of sobriety, Haasan confessed that navigating social situations without drinking can be challenging. She emphasised the difficulty of tolerating party environments when not partaking in alcohol.

Consequently, she has distanced herself from individuals who consistently encourage her to engage in such activities. She is set to appear next in *Salaar* alongside Prabhas of Baahubali fame - BY S. TAMARAI CHELVI

Lotus's Secret Santa Joy

KUALA LUMPUR: This year's "Lotus's Playful and Joyful Moments" Secret Santa Initiative has given joy to hundreds of needy children, whose wishes have been fulfilled this Christmas. The looks of happiness and fulfillment on the faces of the children as they received their presents, was testament to the success of the project.

The project was the brainchild of Lotuss Stores (Malaysia) Sdn Bhd (Lotus's Malaysia) employees, together with its customers and mall tenants who made Christmas extra special this year for 300 children in the Klang Valley.

Corporate Services Executive Director of Lotus's Malaysia, Azliza Azmel said: "Many are excited about the year-end holiday season and are fortunate to be able to spend it with their family and loved ones. However, we know it can be tough for many families, who can't afford buying presents.

"This is why, motivated by our #KitakanJiran spirit, we wanted to help spread joy to children who might not expect to receive a gift this year. We're very grateful to our Lotus's colleagues, customers and even mall tenants who supported us to make this happen" she said.

The event held at Lotus's Selayang welcomed children from Karunai Illam Welfare Home Kepong, House of Joy Puchong, Yayasan Sunbeams Ampang, Praise Emmanuel Children's Home Petaling Jaya, Rainbow Home Cheras, Pertubuhan Kebajikan Kanak Kanak Kepong Kuala Lumpur and Persatuan Kebajikan Warga Tua Wilayah Persekutuan, Pertubuhan Kebajikan Ephratha Rawang,



The Secret Santa Initiative is ongoing till January 1, 2024.

Sweet Care Home Selayang, and Good Samaritan Home Klang.

In addition to their gifts and being greeted by an appearance of Santa, the children were invited to experience the Lotus's "Playful and Joyful Moments" Play Date with activities featuring Mattel brands like Hot Wheels, Matchbox, Polly Pocket and Scrabble.

Head of Lotus's Malls, Melissa Wong, further added, "We are delighted that our aim to make our Lotus's malls more family and children centric is well received. Thanks to everyone who supported our effort and this worthy cause to help put a smile on children's faces this Christmas".

The Lotus's "Playful and Joyful Moments"

activities will continue until January 1 2024 at Lotus's Mutiara Damansara, Lotus's Selayang, Lotus's Klang, Lotus's Rawang and Lotus's Kepong.

To know more about the exciting weekend activities and workshops lined up, customers may refer to the retailer's official social channels below:

Facebook: <https://www.facebook.com/LotussMalaysia>

Instagram: <https://www.instagram.com/lotussmalaysia/>

Visit a special page on the retailer's website to read more about the campaign: <https://corp.lotuss.com.my/campaigns/playful-l-joyful-moments-with-lotuss-mattel>



Ranveer Singh is in *Don 3: The Final Chapter*. - PIC COURTESY OF RANVEER SINGH'S INSTAGRAM

Epic collaboration

RENOWNED South Indian director Lokesh Kanagraj, celebrated for blockbusters like *Vikram*, *Leo* and *Master* in Tamil Nadu, is gearing up for his next venture, tentatively titled *Thalaivar 171*, featuring the iconic Rajinikanth.

This collaboration follows the resounding success of Kanagraj's previous films.

In an intriguing development, Kanagraj initially approached Shah Rukh Khan for an extended cameo in the movie, but the Bollywood superstar declined the role.

Undeterred, the director has shifted his focus to another powerhouse performer, Ranveer Singh. Ranveer, who is set to portray the lead in *Don 3: The Final Chapter*, succeeding Shah Rukh in the iconic role, is now reportedly in talks for a significant role in *Thalaivar 171*.

Scheduled to commence filming in April of this year, it promises fans an enthralling cinematic experience.

The collaboration between Kanagraj and Rajinikanth promises to be an epic blockbuster. - BY S. TAMARAI CHELVI



SCAN ME



Coffee making demonstration.



Cezve pot made of copper. After boiling the coffee is poured into a small cup.

Celebrating World Turkish Coffee Day

➤ More than just a morning ritual

BY S. TAMARAI CHELVI

A cup of coffee in the morning is a routine for most, but for the people of the Republic of Türkiye, Turkish coffee is not just another beverage; instead, it represents much more. It's an essential part of tradition, culture and even language.

For five centuries, coffee has played an important part in their customs, culture, and ceremonies, such as engagements, weddings and baby births. Coffee is a daily ritual and plays a pivotal role as a social mediator to strengthen friendship bonds.

It is often offered as a welcome drink, and even fortune-tellers read the patterns of coffee grounds on the cup to predict the future. Turkish people often like to ask, "How would you like to have your coffee?" after a meal.

Coffee also made its way into their language. The Turkish word for breakfast is *kahvati*, which literally means "meal before coffee." Even a Turkish proverb speaks of coffee, "Every cup of coffee carries 40 years of memories".

Turkish coffee culture was inscribed on Unesco's Intangible Cultural Heritage List in 2013. Since then, Dec 5, the day the coffee was registered, has been celebrated as World Turkish Coffee Day in Türkiye.

To commemorate the tenth anniversary of this landmark event, the Embassy of the Republic of Türkiye in Malaysia hosted a soiree at the consulate in Jalan Ampang, Kuala Lumpur, with foreign dignitaries and members of the media in attendance.

Black and strong

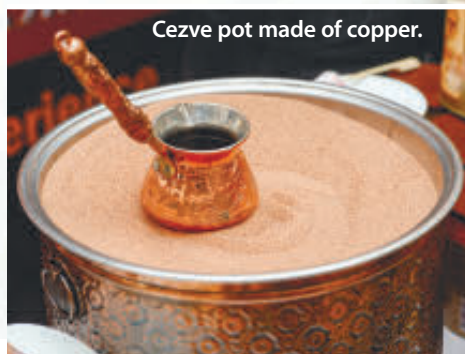
The air in the Embassy of Türkiye building was filled with the rich aroma of freshly brewed coffee as guests were given samples of authentic Turkish coffee. The beverage was served with bite-sized, rose-flavoured Turkish delights and it is common to serve sweet delicacies to balance the taste of the coffee.

The velvety coffee had a much stronger taste but a distinctive flavour compared to the beverages from typical coffee franchises due to its brewing method, which brought out the coffee bean taste.

Espresso lovers will surely dig the extra-strong flavours of this black coffee.

Deeply embedded in Turkish culture

The Turkish Ambassador to Malaysia, Emir



Cezve pot made of copper.



Ambassador Emir speaking about Turkish coffee and how it is deeply embedded in the country's culture, society and history.

Salim Yuksel, explained the importance of coffee in his culture and how it is deeply embedded in the country's history, traditions and language.

"We would like to share this important culture with others around the world. Coffee has been a part of our culture and social structure since the Ottoman Empire. Sometimes, we socialise around it," said Emir.

Emir revealed that Türkiye is not a coffee-growing country, but coffee made its journey into the Ottoman Empire in the 16th century from Ethiopia though Yemen, which was then a

part of the Empire, making its way to the capital city, Istanbul.

"Our unique style of brewing and serving coffee is widely accepted in other countries and we decided to inscribe it into Unesco," explained Emir.

The art of brewing Turkish coffee

This unique method requires special utensils. The process begins with the pouring of a small amount of water at room temperature (about 65ml) into a "cezve", a small pot with a handle

Turkish Coffee with a bite size Turkish delight. – ADIB RAWI/THE SUN



made of copper.

Then, take a heap of roasted and finely ground coffee or powder on a teaspoon (about 6g), mix it with the water in the pot and stir the mixture. Place the pot on the sand mixed with charcoal.

As the bottom part of the pot gently circles on the surface of the sand, the heat will bring the coffee mixture to a boil, forming a frothy and velvety layer. The upper layer is poured into a Turkish coffee cup (or demitasse cup).

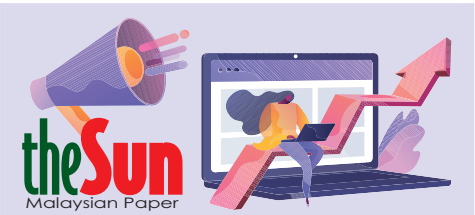
A popular Turkish coffee brand in Istanbul called Kurukarveci Mehmet Efendi has been brewing coffee for 150 years. According to the distributor of the brand in Malaysia, Ephesus Global Trading's director, Mert Ates, Turkish coffee's roasting, brewing and taste are totally different from other coffee.

"Normally, coffee is filtered, but we don't filter the coffee; instead, the coffee ground settles at the bottom of the pot," said Mert.

When the coffee is poured into the cup, it is not stirred to allow the grounds to naturally separate and sink to the bottom. As per the traditional way, no sugar or milk is added in the brewing process.

These days however, some people prefer to drink with sugar and milk, so they add it to the coffee mixture before boiling. Once the frothy layer is poured into the cup, the cezve is put back onto the heated sand for the balance of the coffee mixture to form another layer of froth.

After the coffee tasting, guests were treated to an amazing spread of sweet desserts and traditional Turkish cuisine.



MARKETING EXECUTIVE

Responsibilities

1. Handle both local & outstation Agents and Vendors.
2. Handle sales of newspaper-corporate sales e.g.: Hospital, Hotels, etc.
3. Actively engage in outbound sales activities to acquire new newspaper subscribers.

Requirements

1. Minimum Diploma in Business, Marketing, Communications, or related field with at least 2 years of experience.
2. Proven experience in sales, preferably in the media or publishing industry would be an advantage
3. Ability to work independently and as part of a team.
4. Excellent selling, communication and negotiation skills.

MEDIA SALES REPRESENTATIVE / AGENT (FREELANCE)

Requirements

1. Minimum 1 year sales experience in newspaper bulk sales and digital advertising
2. Attractive commission package and incentive
3. Able to start immediately
4. Central, Nothern, Southern, East Coast and Sabah/Sarawak

If you feel you have what it takes, to join us in the interesting media industry, send your resume (together with a photo of you) via email to hr@thesundaily.com You can call us at +603 7784 6688

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322 Notices

PERISTIHARAN JUALAN
 PERMITAN JUALAN ATAS PERMITAN PEMUNG GADAIAN PTSPU/LO3/2023
 Dalam perkara Mengenal Seksyen 257 dan 263 Kanun Tanah Negara (Disemak 2020) Akta 828
 DI ANTARAPEMANG GADAIAN
 RHB BANK BERHAD (196501000373 (6171-M)) DAN
 GINADASS A/L SINNAPPAN (NO. K/P : 601227-08-6237 / 7078510) PENGADAI-PENGADAI
 Menurut Perintah Pentadbir Tanah Seberang Perai Utara yang diperbuat pada 11 Julai 2023 dan Borang 16H bertarikh 22 Ogos 2023 adalah disyorkan bahawa Pentadbir Tanah Seberang Perai Utara (dengan dibantu oleh Pegawai Berlesen akan menjual secara :-
LELONGAN AWAM PADA 17 JANUARI 2024 (RABU) JAM 10.00 PAGI
 DI PERKARANGAN PEJABAT DAERAH DAN TANAH, SESERANG PERAI UTARA.
NOTA : Bakal-bakal pembeli adalah dinasihatkan agar membuat carian rasmi hakmilik di Pejabat Tanah dan memeriksa hartanah tersebut sebelum menandatangani perjanjian.
BUKTI-BUKTI HAKMILIK
 NO. HAKMILIK : GM 980; NO. LOT : Lot 3957; MUKIM : 07; DAERAH / NEGERI : Seberang Perai Utara / Pulau Pinang; CUKAI TANAH : RM 128.00; PEGANGAN : Selama-lamanya; KELUASAN TANAH : 581 meter persegi (kira-kira 6254 kaki persegi); PEMILIK BERDAPAT : GINADASS A/L SINNAPPAN (NO. K/P : 601227-08-6237 / 7078510) - 1/1 bahagian;
KATEGORI KEKUALAN TANAH: TITIK; SWABAT-SWABAT KIVAT; GERAN MUKIM FIRST GRADE; SEKARAN KEPENTINGAN : TITIK; BEBANAN : Digadai kepada RHB Bank Berhad melalui Penerimaan No. 0702SC1990007259 Jil. 24 Fol. 35, didaftarkan pada 24 Februari 1990.
LOKASI DAN PERHAH HARTANAH:
 Hartanah tersebut merupakan sebuah rumah berkembar satu tingkat yang telah diubahsuai. Alamat hartanah adalah di No. 915, Jalan Telok Air Tawar, Taman Robina, 13050 Butterworth, Pulau Pinang. Keluasan keseluruhan tanah adalah seluas 581 meter persegi (kira-kira 6254 kaki persegi).
HARGA RIZAB:
 Hartanah tersebut akan dijual terlelak kepada satu harga riazab sebanyak **RM800,000.00 (RINGGIT MALAYSIA: LAPAN RATUS RIBU SAHAJAJAN)** dan syarat-syarat jualan yang dinyatakan di perisytiharan jualan. Bagi penawar-penawar yang berminat adalah dikehendaki menandatangani 10% daripada harga riazab dalam bentuk Bank Draft di atas nama **RHB BANK BERHAD** sebelum jam 10.00 pagi pada hari lelongan awam dan baki wang belian hendaklah dibayar oleh pembeli dalam tempoh satu ratus dua puluh (120) hari dari tarikh jualan kepada **RHB BANK BERHAD**. Untuk butiran-butiran selanjutnya, sila berhubung dengan Pentadbir Tanah Seberang Perai Utara, Pulau Pinang atau untuk butiran-butiran selanjutnya, sila berhubung dengan Pentadbir Tanah Seberang Perai Utara, Pulau Pinang atau **TETUAN M. MOHAN, MURUGIAH & ASSOCIATES**, Peguacara bagi Plaintiff di alamat 2-36-A, NB PLAZA, 3000, JALAN BARU, 13600 PRAI, PENANG. Tel: 04-3982787 Fax: 04-3979926. (Ruj : KMM/RHB/HL/1131/170) atau kepada pejabat yang tersebut di bawah :-
 MF PROJECT MANAGEMENT
 Tel: 04-5755897 HPP: 019-3331469
 ABDUL GHAFAR BIN MOHD NOOR PELELONG BERLESE

CALLIN AUTO (M) SDN BHD
 201601014145 (1185076-P)
 (Incorporated in Malaysia)
 (MEMBERS' VOLUNTARY WINDING UP)

At an extraordinary general meeting of the members of CALLIN AUTO (M) SDN BHD duly convened at 62-2, Jalan 2A/27A, Section 1, Wangsa Maju, 53300 Kuala Lumpur on 27.12.2023, the Special Resolutions set out below were duly passed and agreed to.

1. RESOLVED THAT the Company will be liquidated by way of members' voluntary winding up.
2. RESOLVED THAT Heng Chiang Poo, of Messrs FMS Management Services Sdn Bhd 201601033677 (1204618-X), 62-2, Jalan 2A/27A, Section 1, Wangsa Maju, 53300 Kuala Lumpur be appointed as Liquidator to act for the purpose of winding-up the Company's affairs and distributing its assets.
3. RESOLVED THAT the Liquidator be hereby authorised to divide amongst the members in cash, specie or in kind, the whole or any part of the assets of the property to be divided as aforesaid, set such values as he deemed fair upon any property to be divided as aforesaid and may determine how such division shall be carried out as between the members in accordance with their respective rights and interest therein.
4. RESOLVED THAT the Liquidator be indemnified by the Company against all costs, charges, losses, expenses and liabilities incurred in or sustained by him in the execution discharge of his duties as liquidator and in relation thereto.

Director
 Lee Kian Leong
 Dated: 27.12.2023

IN THE MATTER OF THE COMPANIES ACT, 2016 AND IN THE MATTER OF CALLIN AUTO (M) SDN BHD
 201601014145 (1185076-P)
 (Incorporated in Malaysia)
 (MEMBERS' VOLUNTARY WINDING UP)

NOTICE IS HEREBY GIVEN that the creditors of the above named company, which is being voluntarily wound up, are required on or before 31.01.2024 to send in their names and addresses with particulars of their solicitors (if any) to the undersigned Liquidator at 62-2, Jalan 2A/27A, Section 1, Wangsa Maju, 53300 Kuala Lumpur and if so required by notice in writing from the said Liquidator, are by the solicitors or personally to come and prove their debts or claims at such time and place as shall be specified in such notice or in default thereof they will be excluded from the benefits of any distribution made before such debts or claims are proved.

Liquidator
 Heng Chiang Poo
 Dated: 27.12.2023

IN THE MATTER OF THE COMPANIES ACT 2016 AND IN THE MATTER OF KN LOGINFRA SDN BHD
 (199301001506 (256243-K))
 (In Members' Voluntary Winding Up)
 NOTICE OF FINAL MEETING

NOTICE IS HEREBY GIVEN pursuant to Section 459 of the Companies Act 2016, that a Final Meeting of the Company will be held at SOHO Suites @ KLCC, Block A2, Level 32-3A, No. 20, Jalan Perak, 50450 Kuala Lumpur on 2 February 2024 at 10.00 a.m. for the following purposes:

AGENDA:
 1. To receive and consider the Liquidator's Statement of Accounts and Report showing how the winding up has been conducted and to receive any explanation thereon.

2. To consider, and if thought fit, pass the following resolution as an Ordinary Resolution:-
 "That the books, accounts and documents of the Company and of the Liquidator shall be kept by the Liquidator for a period of three (3) months from the date of the Final Meeting and that thereafter such books, accounts and documents may be destroyed by the Liquidator."

Dated this 1 January 2024

Chong Ai Ling
 Liquidator

Note:
 The Member entitled to attend and vote at the meeting may appoint a proxy (or in the case of a corporation, to appoint a representative) to attend and vote in his place. The Form of Proxy may be obtained from the office of the Liquidator located at SOHO Suites @ KLCC, Block A2, Level 32-3A, No. 20, Jalan Perak, 50450 Kuala Lumpur. The appointment of a proxy must be lodged at the Liquidators' office at least forty eight (48) hours before the meeting.

322 Notices

IN THE MATTER OF THE COMPANIES ACT 2016 AND IN THE MATTER OF CRANETECH GLOBAL SDN BHD
 (201401034572 (1110670-P))
 (In Members' Voluntary Winding Up)
 NOTICE OF FINAL MEETING

NOTICE IS HEREBY GIVEN pursuant to Section 459 of the Companies Act 2016, that a Final Meeting of the Company will be held at SOHO Suites @ KLCC, Block A2, Level 32-3A, No. 20, Jalan Perak, 50450 Kuala Lumpur on 2 February 2024 at 10.00 a.m. for the following purposes:

AGENDA:
 1. To receive and consider the Liquidator's Statement of Accounts and Report showing how the winding up has been conducted and to receive any explanation thereon.

2. To consider, and if thought fit, pass the following resolution as an Ordinary Resolution:-
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322 Notices

PicklesAuctions

Bank Repossessed bikes and cars for sale by auction. All auctions are conducted via eBidding on Wednesday 3, 10, 17, 24 & 31 January at 9.30am (bikes) and 11.00am (cars). All are invited to join our **PUBLIC AUCTION**. Viewing and inspection on every Tuesday from 9.30am - 5.30pm.

Download Pickles Auctions app to view all auction listings or visit www.pickles.my

Item	Reg No	Make Model	Price
1	AMR3719	2022 MODENAS KARISMA 125s	4000
2	AMS9652	2022 HONDA RS-X FS150FA	6000
3	BRB 4216	2022 YAMAHA Y15ZR - 150cc	7000
4	BRD8465	2022 HONDA CBR150R	9000
5	CEM7415	2022 SYM VF3I 185 LE	5000
6	CER3249	2022 HONDA DASH 125	5000
7	JVN6870	2022 HONDA RS-X FS150FA	6000
8	PNJ9348	2017 APRILIA SHIVER 750CKD	14000
9	PDE5348	2022 WMOTO F-15I	5000
10	RAK7964	2022 HONDA DASH 125	3000
11	SWE4688	2022 YAMAHA Y15ZR - 150cc	6000
12	TCL3904	2022 HONDA RS-X FS150FA	6000
13	VJD7752	2022 YAMAHA LAGENDA 115Z	4000
14	VJM4742	2022 HONDA RS-X FS150FA	6000
15	VKG2074	2023 HONDA ADV160	10000
16	WKP4613	2023 YAMAHA Y16ZR	8000
17	WXH3147	2012 PROTON EXORA FL 1.6L CVT	16000
18	WUQ9414	2010 HONDA CIVIC 1.8L I-VTEC (A)	28000
19	VEQ5584	2020 PERODUA BEZZA 1.3 ADV	30000
20	PLC8088	2013 TOYOTA HILUX DOUBLE CAB 2.5	36000
21	WSY1181	2009 MAZDA 3 1.6 SEDAN (A)	16000
22	CDV6338	2011 MAZDA 5 2.0L	23000
23	CD35313	2012 FORD FIESTA SPORT 1.6	6000
24	WWE6902	2011 PERODUA ALZA 1.5	17000
25	WXU1801	2012 TOYOTA PRIUS C	12000
26	WAT5939V	2014 PROTON PREVE 1.6	12000
27	WVL9851	2011 NISSAN GRAND LIVINA 1.6L	12000

For more information contact us at [016-6999170](tel:016-6999170) | [012-5553727](tel:012-5553727) (WhatsApp) www.pickles.my | info@pickles.my

PICKLES ASIA SDN BHD [1231292-D]
 Lot 19391, Batu 8 ½, Jalan Klang Lama, Taman Desaria, 46000 Petaling Jaya, Selangor.

322 Notices

NOTICE OF VOLUNTARY WINDING UP BY MEMBERS OF HENG LEONG HARDWARE (SEGAMAT) SDN. BHD.
 197801005460 (42476-T)

NOTICE IS HEREBY GIVEN THAT at the Members' Meeting HENG LEONG HARDWARE (SEGAMAT) SDN. BHD. 197801005460 (42476-T) held on 31st December 2023, the following Special Resolution was duly passed :-

RESOLVED THAT the Company be wound up voluntarily, AND THAT Mr. Koh Kheng Hwa (MIA 20499) of No. 30-A, Jalan Melaka Raya 25, Taman Melaka Raya, 75000 Melaka be and is hereby appointed Liquidator for the purpose of such winding up.

AND THAT the Liquidator be empowered to distribute to the members in specie any part of the assets of the Company.

By Order of the Board,
 Lee Chong

Chairman of Meeting
 Dated : 31st December 2023

In the Matter of the Companies Act, 2016 and In the Matter of HENG LEONG HARDWARE (SEGAMAT) SDN. BHD.
 197801005460 (42476-T)
 (In Members' Voluntary Winding up)

NOTICE IS HEREBY GIVEN THAT the creditors of the abovementioned Company which is being voluntarily wound up, are required on or before the 31st day of January 2024, being the day for that purpose fixed by Mr. Koh Kheng Hwa of No. 30-A, Jalan Melaka Raya 25, Taman Melaka Raya, 75000 Melaka, the Liquidator appointed on 31st December, 2023 by the said Company, to send their names and addresses and the particulars of their debts and claims, and the names and addresses of their solicitor, if any, to the undersigned, and if so required by notice in writing from the said Liquidator, by their solicitors to come in and prove their said debts or claims at such time and place as shall be specified in such notices, or in default thereof they will be excluded from the benefit of any distribution made before such debts are proved.

Dated this : 31st December 2023

Koh Kheng Hwa
 Liquidator

No. 30-A, Jalan Melaka Raya 25, Taman Melaka Raya, 75000 Melaka.

INSIDE EDGE

Warner set for Sydney farewell

DAVID WARNER has been given the hometown farewell from Test cricket he craved after the opening batsman was named in an unchanged Australia line-up for the third and final Test against Pakistan in Sydney this week.

Warner said in June he wanted to call time on his 12-year Test career at the Sydney Cricket Ground and, with the Australians holding an unassailable 2-0 lead in the series, the 37-year-old has been granted his wish.

"The National Selection Panel have retained the same squad from Melbourne to Sydney as we look to clean sweep the Test series," chief selector George Bailey said.

"We look forward to celebrating David Warner's final Test match and his incredible career at his home ground."

Sydneysider Warner went into the current series with question marks over his form due to a lack of Test runs, but a rapidfire 164 in the first innings of the opening Test in Perth erased any doubts over his position in the team.

Australia won that Test by 360 runs before Pat Cummins put on a man-of-the-match performance to seal the second Test in Melbourne last week.

The series win was the fourth in a

row at home for the Australians.

NZ square series with Bangladesh

NEW ZEALAND captain Mitchell Santner took four wickets as they beat Bangladesh by 17 runs in a rain-affected third and final Twenty20 international yesterday to draw the series 1-1.

After dismissing the tourists for 110 in Mount Maunganui, New Zealand's top-order collapsed to 49-5 before Jimmy Neesham and Santner recovered to reach 95-5 off 14.4 overs.

When heavy rain halted play, the Black Caps were comfortably ahead of the Duckworth-Lewis-Stern target, thanks largely to an unbeaten 28 from all-rounder Neesham.

The result denied Bangladesh a first series victory on New Zealand soil in any format, having lost the preceding ODI series 2-1.

After asking Bangladesh to bat first on a lively Bay Oval pitch, Santner claimed 4-16 off his four overs, stifling an innings that was already struggling at 41-3 when he was introduced.

Seamers Tim Southee, Adam Milne and Ben Sears all took two wickets.

Four of New Zealand's top order were dismissed for one run and when Finn Allen followed after scoring 38 with solid support from Santner who was unbeaten on 18.



IS HIRING

- WEB/SOCIAL MEDIA EDITOR
- ASSISTANT WEB/SOCIAL MEDIA EDITOR
- WEB/SOCIAL MEDIA EXECUTIVES

theSun is looking for an experienced web editor to lead the online team in managing the news portal and social media platforms.

We are also looking for an Assistant Web/Social Media Editor and Web/Social Media Executives to beef up our online team.

<p>JOB DESCRIPTION:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▶ The Web/Social Media Editor is expected to research, plan, write and edit content for the portal and our social media sites. ▶ Able to oversee the daily online operations and web team. ▶ Monitor number of uploads to portal and social media platforms. ▶ Ensure content uploaded are correct and meet standards set by the company. ▶ Communicate well with team members and coordinate their work. ▶ The Assistant Web/Social Media Editor will help the Web/Social Media Editor in overseeing daily operations of the web team. 	<p>EXPERIENCE REQUIREMENTS:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▶ The successful candidate should be a skilled writer and editor, with an eye for detail. ▶ Have good knowledge of how to boost online traffic. ▶ Good with all social media platforms and SEO skills. ▶ Able to ensure legal compliance with all content. ▶ Minimum five years of working experience in same capacity for post of Web/Social Media Editor. ▶ Minimum three years of working experience in same capacity for post of Assistant Web/Social Media Editor. ▶ Minimum one year of working experience in same capacity for post of Web/Social Media Executives.
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No joy for Nadal as double match ends in defeat

RAFA NADAL returned to action for the first time since January at the Brisbane International yesterday, losing his doubles match but overall showing no obvious after-effects of the hip injury that ruined his year.

The 22-time Grand Slam champion, who is gearing up for the Jan 14-28 Australian Open, sustained the hip problem in his second round loss at Melbourne Park at the start of 2023 and ended his season early after having surgery in June.

Nadal rekindled his partnership with retired veteran Marc Lopez, with whom he won an Olympic gold medal in 2016, for his comeback but the duo lost 6-4 6-4 to Australians Max Purcell and Jordan Thompson at a packed Pat Rafter Arena.

"It's great to see Rafa back," said Thompson. "I've been on the receiving end a couple of times in singles, so it's nice to get him back on a doubles court."

The 37-year-old Nadal was warmly welcomed by fans who held up Spanish flags and supportive messages while the loudest cheers were reserved for his trademark whipped shots and a powerful crosscourt backhand winner in the opening set.

Nadal is likely to get a similar reception in his singles opener tomorrow overnight against qualifier Dominic Thiem.

Former US Open champion Sloane Stephens got her campaign off to a good start as she beat Katerina Siniakova 7-5 6-3 while Camila Giorgi survived a scare to get past Peyton Stearns 5-7 6-2 6-3.

Russian 16-year-old Mirra Andrejeva also reached the second round with a 6-2 6-3 win over Diana Shnaider. – Reuters

Gauff says pressure is off in 2024

WORLD NO. 3 Coco Gauff said yesterday she felt more relaxed heading into the next month's Australian Open after achieving her goal of winning a Grand Slam title as a teenager.

The 19-year-old won the US Open in September and said it was a weight off her shoulders as she embarks on her 2024 season at the Auckland Classic beginning today, where she is defending champion.

"I felt like I had a clock and I needed to win as a teenager," said Gauff, who turns 20 in March.

"Just for how I started, with Wimbledon and everything, I felt like I just needed to.

"Not with anyone's expectations from my team, but fans and people who watch the game," she told reporters in Auckland.

With a first Slam tucked under her belt, she said it would be a different feeling at the Australian Open starting on Jan 14, which would otherwise have been the last chance to achieve her teenage dream.

"I'm always going to put pressure on myself. I want to strive for more and I don't want to only win one," Gauff said.

Gauff said her 2023 campaign was defined in her mind as much by her shock first-round loss to Sofia Kenin at Wimbledon as her US Open breakthrough.

"After Wimbledon I reached the lowest point of my career, losing that match," Gauff said.

"Learning from it helped me push forward and I think sometimes you need those setbacks to push you forward.

"Not to wake me up, because I felt like I always was awake, but realise that maybe you should put less pressure on every single match." – AFP

Djokovic taking success 'season by season'

BY SHRIVATHSA SRIDHAR

NOVAK DJOKOVIC hopes to continue enjoying success in Australia, where he has claimed 10 of his 24 Grand Slam titles, but the 36-year-old said he would take it "season by season" at this stage of his career.

Djokovic has won the Australian Open on four of his last five visits barring the 2022 tournament, which he missed after he was deported due to not being vaccinated against Covid-19.

He received a warm welcome earlier this year before his run to a record-extending triumph and will be the firm favourite to win another title at the major which begins on Jan 14.

"I hope it's not the last,

to be honest. I mean I always look forward coming back to Australia," Djokovic told reporters.

"Coming back to Australia, I always felt like I played my best tennis over the years (here) and had great support.

"So I'm not sure, I don't really have a plan (for) what's going to happen next year. I'm taking it season by season to see how far it takes me."

Djokovic, who previously said he hopes to play well into his 40s, begins his Australian Open preparations representing Serbia at the United

Cup mixed team event in Perth. He last played in the city at the 2013 Hopman Cup.

"It feels great, it's been a while since I was here," said Djokovic, who will carry Serbia's hopes against China and the Czech Republic in the group stage.

"I remember every single time I played in Perth it was great attendance, people love tennis, people love sport in Australia in general.

"So I don't expect anything less this time and I'm sure it's going to be a blast for all of us.

"Representing Serbia is the greatest honour and pride, so hopefully we can have a packed house and a lot of people coming to watch our matches." – The Independent



Optimistic Rafa

Former world No. 1 leaves door open to playing beyond 2024

RAFAEL NADAL left the door ajar yesterday to continuing after the 2024 season, but conceded there was "a high percentage" that he was on his last trip as a player to Australia.

Speaking ahead of his comeback from a 12-month injury absence at the season-opening Brisbane International, the 37-year-old Spaniard said he did not know for sure what the future held.

"The problem about saying that's going to be my last season is I can't predict what's going on 100% in the future," he said.

"That's why I say 'probably.' It's obvious it's a high percentage that it's going to be my last time playing here in Australia.

"But if I am here next year, don't tell me, 'You said it was going to be your last season,' because I didn't say it.

"You never know what's going on, you know? I can't predict how I'm going to be in the next six months. I can't predict if my body will allow me to enjoy tennis as much as I enjoyed the past 20 years.

"It's not an easy decision, but I know inside myself that it is a high percentage that it's going to be my last one."

The 22-time Grand Slam champion said that the last year, with surgery for a hip injury, had been tough and he contemplated quitting at one point during his recovery.

But he said he had never lost his

love for the sport, which motivated him to keep going.

"Of course I was asking myself that (about retirement), but at some point I decided to keep going. I had the determination to keep going."

Nadal, who has been sidelined since injuring his hip at the 2023 Australian Open, begins his singles comeback against a qualifier in the first round in Brisbane.

Asked whether he identified with Naomi Osaka, who on Saturday admitted she had fallen out of love with tennis during her break from the tour, Nadal said that was not the case for him.

"She got tired or lost a little bit of motivation for the game," he said.

"That never happened to me. I

had to be away because my body was not able to keep going."

Nadal said the long absence had allowed his body to heal and he no longer woke up every morning in pain, but he had no expectations heading into the new season and would take it week-by-week.

"Competing is different than practising, but in terms of practising with the guys here, I am quite happy because I feel competitive against the players that I played in practice," he said.

"Of course I don't have the expectations that I used to have in the past.

"It's obvious, no? It's one year (away). It's surgery. For me it is a little bit unpredictable how things are going to be." – AFP

Cilic sees bigger picture on comeback trail

WHILE the tennis world is focused on Rafael Nadal's comeback in Brisbane, another Grand Slam champion, Marin Cilic, is playing his first tournament after an injury-ravaged 2023 during which he thought his career might be over.

When the 2014 US Open champion injured his right knee almost exactly a year ago at the Pune tournament in India, he had no idea it would herald 12 months of pain, surgery, rehab and reflection.

But the big-serving Croatian is back on court in Hong Kong this week, wondering if the long months of treatment and the hard work to come back have all been worth it.

"Who knows?" the 1.98m Cilic told AFP at

Victoria Park, the venue for this week's Hong Kong Open.

"It was an interesting year that stopped right at the beginning," he said.

"I had a surgery on the meniscus and also there was an issue with the cartilage."

Cilic began the year on the up, having in 2022 broken back into the world's top 15 for the first time since 2019, but his inaction has seen him slide to 674th.

He faces a tough assignment in his comeback match when the first round in Hong Kong gets under way today, having drawn Germany's world No. 25 Jan-Lennard Struff.

"Definitely a difficult opponent, especially for the start of the new season for me – and for him," Cilic smiled.

"We've known each other for many years and we are really great friends. So definitely it's going to be a big challenge, a big task."

It's an important barometer for Cilic as he tries to get some miles into his legs ahead of the Australian Open, which begins in two weeks.

As he looks ahead to the 2024 season, Cilic is not setting himself any goals.

"If I have the opportunity to play I'll be really happy. If not, if things go sideways or go wrong, you know, that's still OK." – AFP

Rabiot stars for Juventus

ADRIEN RABBIOT'S second half goal earned Juventus a 1-0 home win against Roma as they moved within two points of the Serie A leaders, Inter Milan.

Juve got the breakthrough two minutes after halftime when Rabiot, left unmarked by the Roma defence, received a flick from Dusan Vlahovic inside the box and calmly slotted home.

Federico Chiesa thought he had extended Juve's lead just before the end, receiving a deflected ball inside the box and turning it in, but was flagged offside.

Juve finish the year in second place with 43 points from 18 games, behind Inter, who drew 1-1 at Genoa on Saturday and have 45. Jose Mourinho's Roma are seventh with 28 points.

Mourinho praised his side's performance despite the defeat at the Allianz Stadium.

"Tonight we lacked concreteness. We failed to score and that's a shame because it could have been completely different," Mourinho told DANZ.

"We did what we had prepared, I'm happy with the players and the character they showed tonight.

"We put in a brave performance, we played with courage. The goal changed everything. I'm happy with the quality of the game and the personality of the players."

Christian Pulisic ensured Milan ended the year on a high by scoring a second half goal that secured a 1-0 home win over Sassuolo.

In the 59th minute, the American broke the deadlock by skilfully chipping the ball over Sassuolo keeper Andrea Consigli after receiving Ismael Bennacer's defence-splitting pass.

Milan had two goals disallowed. The first came early when Olivier Giroud provided an offside cross to Bennacer and

the second just after the half-hour mark when Rafael Leão's finish was cancelled out for offside in the buildup.

Milan are in third place with 36 points, narrowing the gap to the leaders, Internazionale, to nine.

"We won well, we could have scored a few more goals and we could have done better, we need to find that continuity in the 95 minutes to find a higher standard," said Milan's underfire boss Stefano Pioli.

"The boys were very good and very careful. The group is cohesive, compact, has never given in to difficulties and wants to overcome them." - AFP/Agencies



Rabiot

Villans looking dangerous

Emery keeps new year's resolution small after latest win

BY PHIL MEDLICOTT

UNAI EMERY stressed his aim heading into the new year is to get better after Aston Villa concluded their "really fantastic" 2023 with a 3-2 home victory over Burnley.

Douglas Luiz notched the winner against the 10-man Claret's with an 89th-minute penalty as Villa moved level on points with Premier League leaders Liverpool, ahead of the Reds hosting Newcastle on Tuesday (4am Malaysian time)

It was the midland outfit's 26th top-flight win of 2023 and a club-record 32nd victory in all competitions across the calendar year.

And boss Emery, when asked if he thought 2024 could be even better, said: "Always the idea is to improve and get better."

"It was really fantastic, the year we did - but I'm very excited for the next match."

"We have 42 points and we can feel comfortable and happy, but... my expectation for the next year is try to progress. I am going to manage how we can progress."

He added: "When I arrived here (in late 2022) the message always was get better, try to play Europe, try to be a contender to be in

the top 10, in the top seven, now we are top four.

"We are in at the moment and if on (match) day 30, 32 we are in, maybe we can think it is our opportunity to get it."

Villa led at the break thanks to a 42nd-minute Moussa Diaby finish after Leon Bailey's opener for the hosts had been cancelled out by Zeki Amdouni.

Burnley suffered a further setback with Sander Berge being sent off early in the second half, but it looked as if it could prove a frustrating afternoon for Villa after Lyle Foster drew things level again in the 71st minute.

Luiz then netted from the spot late on following a foul by former Villa man Aaron Ramsey on fellow substitute Jhon Duran.

Burnley boss Vincent Kompany, whose side remain second-bottom, five points adrift of safety, joked that he had spent half an hour in an ice bath reflecting on the game and said: "(I have) a mixture of feeling really proud and frustration."

"There's a few things we can't control, and right now you'll have to allow me to not feel great about it. My understanding of some situations in the game was tested."

He proceeded to express his unhappiness over a number of decisions made by the match officials, which included describing the first of Berge's two yellow cards as "really soft", the second as "even softer" and the penalty incident as "soft" as well, adding: "I'm bamboozled, baffled." - The Independent



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Relieved Guardiola

City wrap up a memorable 2023 with win over Sheffield United

BY ANDY HAMPSON

PEP GUARDIOLA played down the significance of his side's victory over Sheffield United yesterday despite it increasing the pressure at the top of the Premier League.

Goals from Rodri and Julian Alvarez at the Etihad Stadium saw the champions wrap up a memorable 2023 - a year in which they won five trophies - with a comfortable 2-0 victory over the struggling Blades.

The result lifted City within two points of leaders Liverpool at the end of a draining month in which they played nine matches, including two in Saudi Arabia at the Club World Cup.

That could be viewed as ominous for the rest of the competition but City manager Guardiola did not want to be drawn into such talk.

Guardiola said: "What we have done in the past doesn't mean it is going to happen in the

future. The future is happy New Year and three days off, and after that it is Huddersfield. No further than that.

"Except for two or three games, we were better than the opponents and could not get the results we deserved - but it is business and you have to win games.

"Today we did it and I'm really pleased for the guys. It was an intense month."

Guardiola felt City were initially below their best but was pleased with the way they roused themselves.

He said: "The first half was a little bit flat. The body language of the players - they didn't communicate, didn't talk, didn't laugh, didn't shout.

"It was 'OK, I have to play a football game,' but football games cannot be played in that way.

"At halftime, for the first time, I didn't talk

one word about tactics. I took a chair and sat and said, 'Guys go out with a smile on your face and with another rhythm in terms of enjoying what you're doing. We are not going to do what happened against Crystal Palace.'

"In the second half, the first 15 minutes were the best minutes that we did."

Defeat left Sheffield United bottom of the table but manager Chris Wilder found positives in the attitude of his players.

He said: "It felt like we played football for about five hours. At the start, when you are walking out, and you see five trophies, it hits home to you and what you are up against.

"It is incredibly difficult to come here, even for the top teams. We stuck at it and it was great experience for the young lads to learn. There is no downside from this game." - The independent



Chelsea's Cole Palmer (right) vies with Luton Town's Gabriel Osho during the English Premier League match at Kenilworth Road Saturday. - AFPPIX

Palmer double sinks Luton

COLE PALMER struck twice as Chelsea survived a late scare to banish their away-day blues with a 3-2 win against Premier League strugglers Luton on Saturday.

Mauricio Pochettino's side were in complete control when Palmer scored his second goal to put the visitors three up with 20 minutes to play.

Palmer had opened the scoring at Kenilworth Road before Noni Madueke doubled Chelsea's lead late in the first half.

But former Chelsea midfielder Ross Barkley netted to spark a spirited finish from third bottom Luton, who scored again through Elijah Adebayo in a dramatic finale.

Chelsea's second consecutive win was their first success away from home since a victory at Tottenham on Nov 6, ending a four-game losing streak on their travels.

If that was encouraging for Pochettino, the manner of their late bout of nerves suggested there is still much to work on for an inconsistent team languishing in 10th place.

"I'm so pleased because we need to be great to beat Luton. It's difficult to play here," Pochettino said.

"We are a young team. They need to work together to create this trust and confidence.

"This type of result when you need your teammates to fight with you will be a really good thing."

It is the fourth time this season that Palmer has scored and assisted in the same game, which is more than any other player in the League.

He is also only the fifth Chelsea player to reach double figures for goal involvements (eight goals, four assists) in a single Premier League season while aged 21 or under, joining a list which also includes Arjen Robben, Eden Hazard, Christian Pulisic and Mason Mount.

"Hopefully it is just the start. I have adapted to a new life, new teammates and the city. Hopefully I can show more on the pitch as well," Palmer said.

Pochettino will be hoping that is the case for Palmer and Chelsea as they look to improve on a poor 2023.

"He is an important player for us," he said. "He is a decisive player. I am so pleased with him and the team."

Former England midfielder Jermaine Jenas described Palmer as "sensational" on TNT Sports. - AFP/Agencies

SPORTS TOTO RESULTS

DRAW NO: 5740/2023 DATE: 31/12/2023 (SUN)
STM LOTTERY SDN. BHD.
196901000090 (8420-D)

TOTO 4D PRIZE PAYMENTS GUARANTEED IN FULL

1st Prize	1441
2nd Prize	0877
3rd Prize	5816
Special	3623 8992 1736 1745 4985 1383 7339 4944 6000 4648
Consolation	5775 9754 5508 8936 1644 7182 9444 0009 1086 4055

4D JACKPOT

Jackpot 1	RM 2,867,133.19
1441 0877 0877 1441	0877 1441
1441 5816 5816 1441	5816 1441
0877 5816 5816 0877	5816 0877

Jackpot 2 RM 476,495.14

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1st Prize	1441	+	
2nd Prize	0877	+	
3rd Prize	5816	+	RABBIT
4th Prize	Special Prize	+	
5th Prize	Consolation Prize	+	
6th Prize	Any 4D drawn number		

TOTO 5D & 6D PRIZE PAYMENTS GUARANTEED IN FULL

5D	1ST 2 3 4 5 4
	4TH 3 4 5 4
2ND	0 3 3 4 6
3RD	3 0 7 4 4
	5TH 4 5 4
	6TH 5 4

6D

1ST	8 4 7 9 5 4
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Jackpot 1	RM 2,693,188.05

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1st Prize	9070
2nd Prize	3461
3rd Prize	8531
Starters	Consolation
7515 5998	9724 5683
9347 1362	4961 4933
4774 7645	6647 8051
1303 4095	3974 1769
1718 2070	1033 4419

1-3D Jackpot	RM 3,201,932.40
9070 + 3461	3461 + 9070
9070 + 8531	8531 + 9070
3461 + 8531	8531 + 3461
Jackpot 2	RM 498,886.40

3+3D Bonus	
1st Prize Bonus	RM 140,000.00
939 070 + MONKEY	
2nd Prize Bonus	RM 2,186,817.00
093 461 + MONKEY	
3rd Prize Bonus	RM 304,861.00
318 531 + RABBIT	
Starters	Consolation
227 515 285 998	909 724 085 683
399 347 561 362	774 961 654 933
414 774 897 645	516 647 998 051
731 303 354 095	333 974 161 769
471 718 332 070	841 033 414 419

3D	
1st Prize	070
2nd Prize	461
3rd Prize	531
Jackpot	RM 707,660.80
070 + 461 + 531	461 + 531 + 070
070 + 531 + 461	531 + 070 + 461
461 + 070 + 531	531 + 461 + 070

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NATIONAL football legend Datuk Zainal Abidin Hassan is confident that the Harimau Malaya can nick points from the two opening ties against Jordan and Bahrain in the 2023 Asian Cup Finals in Doha, Qatar from Jan 12 to Feb 10.

The former Selangor striker said this is based on the fact that national head coach Kim Pan Gon has managed to paper over the cracks in the national team and the encouraging performances dished out by the Harimau Malaya this year.

"We did not lose by a big margin to Bahrain and Tajikistan, and that was before Pan Gon had time to strengthen the team. Jordan is not much different (in terms of performance) from Tajikistan.

"The national team also found themselves trailing against Kyrgyzstan but our men bounced back to win. If they can maintain that performance in the Asian Cup, I am confident they can beat Jordan," he said when met recently.

The Harimau Malaya lost 2-1 to Bahrain in the 2023 Asian Cup Qualifiers in June 2022 and 2-0 to

Time to earn their stripes

Former national players confident Harimau Malaya can shine in Doha

Tajikistan in the 2023 Merdeka Tournament in October.

Malaysia then created a sensation in November when they fought back from 3-1 down to edge Kyrgyzstan 4-3 in their opening Group D match of the 2026 World Cup/2027 Asian Cup Qualifiers.

Malaysia will begin their 2023 Asian Cup Finals Group E campaign against Jordan on Jan 15 before taking on Bahrain on Jan 20 and completing their group fixtures against two-time champions and favourites South Korea on Jan 25.

Zainal Abidin also hailed Pan Gon's decision to include Kuala Lumpur (KL) City FC's newly naturalised striker Romel Morales in the squad,

saying it was a brilliant move to give the Harimau Malaya attack more bite.

He added that the Harimau Malaya backline had also shown significant improvement this year. "We have seen the strength of our backline. Although they still make some mistakes, let them be a lesson. I feel that Pan Gon knows what he wants from the defenders and they must cut down on the mistakes at the back," he said.

Another former national football player Khalid Jamlus said Harimau Malaya are in the best condition going into the 2023 Asian Cup. The Golden Boot winner hopes that the national team can maintain excellent performance.

The last meeting between Malaysia and Jordan was in a 2021 international friendly, where the national team lost 0-4, while the match against Bahrain was in the qualification for the 2023 Asian Cup, where Harimau Malaya lost 1-2.

"But with the current team (Harimau Malaya), I don't think it's a problem, and I believe they can defeat the Jordan team to secure the first points," he said

"Our local players are better now compared to before, so I hope they are given more opportunities to play and shine; now, naturalisation has filled our football, and in the long run, local players will have nothing to worry about," he said. - Bernama

Daddy Rafiq ready to set lanes on fire

NATIONAL bowling ace Muhammad Rafiq Ismail is ready to take his game a notch higher after becoming a father recently.

The 2018 world champion, whose wife gave birth to their first child, Muhammad Yusuf, recently, said his son is all the motivation and inspiration he needs to continue to dominate the Asian men's bowling scene.

"Yes, life is a lot different with a child but, whatever it is, I will try to adjust to the current situation.

"I don't want to use this (the birth of his son) as an excuse but, instead, use it to motivate myself to win more tournaments because I believe my son will be a blessing to me," he told Bernama.

Based on the Asian Bowling Federation ranking, Muhammad Rafiq is Asia's No. 1 for the third year running since 2021 after



National kepler Muhammad Rafiq Ismail. - BERNAMAPIX

accumulating 442 points.

The 2018 Asian Games gold medalist is also satisfied with his performance this year, having proven to be a class above the rest when he clinched four gold medals at the 26th Asian Tenpin Bowling Championships (ATBC) in Hong Kong in January.

The 26-year-old proved his mettle in Hong Kong by winning the men's Masters, All Events, team (with Syafiq Ridhwan, Mohd Syazir Shamsudin, Tun Hakim Tun Hasnul Azam, Timmy Tan and Ahmad Muaz Fishol)

and trios (with Timmy and Ahmad Muaz).

"However, I am a little disappointed that I did not bring home a medal at the 2023 World Championships in Kuwait in October," he said.

Muhammad Rafiq, who is currently on holiday, expects to return to action in March.

Malaysian Tenpin Bowling Congress secretary-general Maradona Chok had previously announced that they have lined up 12 international tournaments for the national keglers in 2024. - Bernama

RESULTS & STANDINGS

ENGLISH PREMIER LEAGUE: Aston Villa 3 (Bailey 28, Diaby 42, Luiz 89-pen) Burnley 2 (Amdouni 31, Foster 71), Crystal Palace 3 (Olise 14, 58, Eze 39) Brentford 1 (Lewis-Potter 2), Luton 2 (Barkley 80, Adebayo 87) Chelsea 3 (Palmer 12, 70, Madueke 37), Manchester City 2 (Rodri 14, Alvarez 61) Sheffield United 0, Nottingham Forest 2 (Dominguez 64, Gibbs-White 82) Manchester United 1 (Rashford 78), Wolves 3 (Kilman 25, Cunha 53, Dawson 61) Everton 0.

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Liverpool	19	12	6	1	39	16	42
Aston Villa	20	13	3	4	43	27	42
Man City	19	12	4	3	45	21	40
Arsenal	19	12	4	3	36	18	40
Tottenham	19	11	3	5	39	28	36
West Ham	19	10	3	6	33	30	33
Man Utd	20	10	1	9	22	27	31
Brighton	19	8	6	5	38	33	30
Newcastle	19	9	2	8	37	25	29
Chelsea	20	8	4	8	34	31	28
Wolves	20	8	4	8	30	31	28
Bournemouth	18	7	4	7	27	32	25
Crystal Palace	20	5	6	9	22	29	21
Fulham	19	6	3	10	26	34	21
Nottm Forest	20	5	5	10	24	35	20
Brentford	19	5	4	10	26	31	19
Everton	20	8	2	10	24	28	16
Luton	19	4	3	12	23	37	15
Burnley	20	3	2	15	20	41	11
Sheff Utd	20	2	3	15	15	49	9

SERIE A: AC Milan 1 (Pulisic 59) Sassuolo 0, Atalanta 1 (Lookman 58) Lecce 0, Cagliari 0 Empoli 0, Juventus 1 (Rabiot 47) Roma 0, Udinese 3 (Pereyra 23, Lucca 48, Payero 52) Bologna 0, Verona 0 Salernitana 1 (Tchaoun 48).

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Inter Milan	18	14	3	1	42	8	45
Juventus	18	13	4	1	27	11	43
AC Milan	18	11	3	4	32	20	36
Fiorentina	18	10	3	5	27	18	33

SHORTS

Wolves end year on high

WOLVES ended the year on a positive note with an impressive 3-0 victory over lacklustre Everton and paid tribute to Mario Lemina, after the midfielder's father died on Saturday.

Manager Gary O'Neil has made his mark on the hosts, who lie in 11th position, just three points shy of a European place, since he took over in the summer.

Wolves were the side probing early on and deservedly took the lead on 25 minutes when skipper Max Kilman bundled in from close range after Jordan Pickford initially made a sharp save from teammate Jarrad Branthwaite's wayward clearance.

It was the only effort on target in the first half and the hosts celebrated by holding up Lemina's shirt.

The home side added a second on 53 minutes when Hwang Hee-chan picked out an easy finish for Matheus Cunha at the far post and the Brazilian then turned provider when Craig Dawson poked home a low cross.

"An incredible week really. Nine points in six days with players missing - an incredible effort from everyone. The work that goes in behind the scenes has helped the team," said Wolves' boss Gary O'Neil.

"It was probably my favourite performance of the season. The togetherness is huge."

Hodgson calls sack speculation 'disrespectful'

CRYSTAL PALACE boss Roy Hodgson branded speculation he could be replaced by ex-Nottingham Forest boss Steve Cooper as "disrespectful" after his side snapped an eight-match winless streak with a 3-1 home victory over Brentford.

Influential duo Eberechi Eze and Michael Olise were responsible for all three of the Eagles' goals, with Olise bagging his first Premier League brace.

The hosts entered the contest just three points above the relegation zone, leaving some suggesting a loss to the only side in worse form than Hodgson's own could spell the end of his second spell in south London.

Asked about the Cooper rumours, Hodgson said: "I'm 76 years of age. I've been working 47 years, I've got a CBE for my services and I've got a CV which is incredible, so my final answer to you is that makes no difference or has any interest to me at all, and to suggest that it should be disrespectful."

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6687	2418	0064	7208
3551	4800	5175	0229

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 GROUP 2: 1 2 2 7 8 OR 2 2 7 8 5
 GROUP 3: 1 2 2 7 OR 2 7 8 5
 GROUP 4: 1 2 2 OR 7 8 5
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'We have to do better'

Ten Hag urges inconsistent Man Utd to improve after defeat at Forest

BY SIMON PEACH

Man United's Alejandro Garnacho (right) vies with Nottingham Forest's Gonzalo Montiel during the English Premier League match at The City Ground yesterday. - AFPPIX



UNDER-FIRE Erik ten Hag says misfiring Manchester United have to "step up" and find a modicum of consistency after Nottingham Forest inflicted their 14th defeat of a chastening season.

A year that began with positivity and silverware ended with the Red Devils under intense scrutiny given they are already out of Europe, the Carabao Cup and Premier League title race.

United have been infuriatingly inconsistent throughout the campaign, epitomised by the thrilling 3-2 Boxing Day turnaround against Aston Villa being followed up yesterday's limp 2-1 loss at Forest.

"One thing is clear we are not consistent," boss Ten Hag said. "We can beat the best teams in the League, but we also lose games we should win, and I think today was one of them."

"We always have to swap (players due to absences). I don't think I talk a lot about players we don't have. Every time I am telling it doesn't matter who we line up, we have to win. But the routines are not there if every time we have to swap."

"Today is another example. When (Rasmus) Hojlund is ill, we have to swap our frontline and we have seen it in the first half there was no speed in the game there."

This was quite the comedown from the Boxing Day victory against Villa and the positivity some fans felt after the Christmas Eve announcement that Sir Jim Ratcliffe is becoming minority owner.

Ineos are taking responsibility for the footballing operations and Ten Hag said on Saturday that he was convinced they wanted to keep him on as manager.

Sir Dave Brailsford, Ineos' director of sport, watched yesterday's game in the directors' box alongside Sir Alex Ferguson, whose final League title in 2013

looks unlikely to be added to anytime soon.

"They know me and they know when I have a squad what is available, then the results will be there," Ten Hag said.

"We are already proving against the top teams we can go head to head, so I'm convinced and have strong belief we get more progress in this team, that we get more consistency in."

"I think this is part of a project. We were overperforming last year. This year so far, we are underperforming."

"We have to do better, we have to step up and I have to lead that process."

The performances have made as grim viewing as the results, with this United's 14th loss of the season in all competitions and 21st in total of 2023.

Asked if he is confident of things improving, Ten Hag said: "Yeah, of course I believe that."

"I know when players are returning, then I am sure this side will be stronger."

"You have to clinically analyse this, then we know where it's come from. We have a lack of routines, we have to work on that."

The post-match analysis will be dominated by United, but this was Forest's night.

Four days on from winning 3-1 at Newcastle, new manager Nuno Espirito Santo celebrated his first home win in charge as they beat the Red Devils for the first time since 1994.

Morgan Gibbs-White's late strike from the edge of the box wrapped up a memorable triumph after Marcus Rashford had capitalised on a terrible Matt Turner pass to cancel out Nicolas Dominguez's opener.

"They did the job, the players played well," Forest boss Espirito Santo said. "I think the team was compact."

"In the first half, I think we controlled pretty well the game, we defend well. We had good spells of possession, didn't finish too much actions."

"Much better in the second half, we start to combine. First goal, good movement, good combination and good finish."

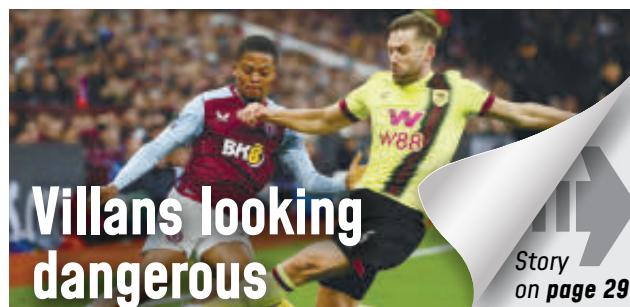
"We concede and it seems we're going to be in trouble but the reaction was immediate, it showed character, so the players should enjoy the video because they did a fantastic job."

"And the fans, we cannot thank them enough so let's enjoy this moment together." - The Independent



Optimistic Rafa

Story on page 28



Villans looking dangerous

Story on page 29



Time to earn their stripes

Story on page 31