

**Maybank annual profit hits record, to speed up regional expansion**  
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Malayan Banking Bhd (Maybank), Malaysia's biggest bank, notched up a second consecutive year of record earnings on the back of double-digit loan growth in Southeast Asia and said it will accelerate plans to expand in the region.

Maybank, led by new chief Abdul Farid Alias, has been keen to boost overseas profits to 40% of overall income in 2015 from about 30% now.

For the full year, net profit climbed 15.8% to a record RM6.6 billion (\$2 billion), driven by 14% annual growth in loans and advances from Maybank's operations at home and in Indonesia, China and Singapore.

Fourth-quarter net profit came to RM1.73 billion, up 18.5% from a year earlier and ahead of an average estimate of RM1.69 billion from two analysts polled by Thomson Reuters I/B/E/S.

"The deepening of Maybank's business portfolio in the region is another near-term priority for the Group in 2014," the lender said in a statement to the stock exchange on Thursday.

It said it wanted to provide cross border banking solutions with its Islamic banking business and expand insurance and takaful services in other markets.

Maybank said it will maintain its dividend policy with a payout ratio of 40 to 60% profit and expects earnings in 2014 to remain satisfactory.

It gave a target of 13% for loan growth across its business operations in 2014, a tad lower than the 14% seen this year partly due to weaker domestic demand.

"Domestic consumer spending is vulnerable to inflationary pressures arising from the government's actions to address the fiscal deficit through... price adjustments (of essential items)," said the lender, which is seen as bellwether of the Malaysian economy.

Rival CIMB Group Holdings Bhd, Malaysia's second-largest bank, on Tuesday reported a fifth straight year of record profits and was upbeat about the year ahead on the back of booming economic growth in Southeast Asia.

Shares in Maybank inched up 0.2% before the earnings announcement. The broader market, which reopens at 0700 GMT (3pm MYT), was up 0.4%

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