



SEPP BLATTER

Blatter arrives in Dhaka today

SPORTS REPORTER

FIFA president Sepp Blatter will arrive in Dhaka this morning from Zurich to attend the opening ceremony of the inaugural AFC Challenge Cup which kicks off today.

AFC president Mohammad Bin Hammam will also accompany the world football supremo, who will declare the 16-nation meet open between the inaugural day's two matches at the Bangabandhu National Stadium.

It would be the second time a FIFA chief will be visiting the country after FIFA's Brazilian boss Joao Havelange's trip to Dhaka in 1983.

Blatter, who will spend a busy

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Stage set for minnows



AL MUSABBIR SADI

There will be no clear favourites when the inaugural AFC Challenge Cup kicks off in Dhaka and Chittagong today with 16 national teams participating in one of the major football events to be held in the country's history.

Only in 1978 have Bangladesh hosted more teams in a single tournament when 32 nations visited Dhaka for the 28th Asian Youth Football Championship.

The Asian Football Confederation (AFC) has designed the tournament to give a boost to the emerging nations of the continent who starve for international exposure. Many think that AFC's launching of this tournament -- to be held every two years -- at a cost of about 2.5 million dollars is not only a giant step toward development of the game for the minnows but also a perfect stage for the host country to bring back the popularity of the game.

But it would also be a scope for developing countries like India and hosts Bangladesh to enrich their showcase with silverware of a tournament of this magnitude, where 14 teams from AFC's list of emerging nations join the South Asian football powerhouses.

FIFA President Sepp Blatter and AFC President Mohammad Bin Hammam's presence at the inaugural ceremony would also give the event a facelift.

Although Bangladesh and India have won trophies in regional intervals, central Asia's Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan -- the former Soviet Union states -- have yet to participate in the finals of a continental event despite being impressive since their joining AFC. One of the two are billed as favourites to reach the April 16 final provided they can eliminate hosts Bangladesh in the earlier stages.

Palestine, one of the top FIFA ranked teams (second in after India), will look to build on their recent success although they have been trying to rebuild the whole

nation from the ruins of war. For five years, their federation failed to organise a league and as a result, the will have to rely heavily on foreign-based footballers. Their 1-0 upset win over Singapore in the 2007 Asian Cup qualifiers would be a headache for the opposition coaches.

War-torn Cambodia are not even certain of the strength of a young side but showed enough courage to utter the words that they are eyeing a place at least among the last eight.

The tournament will also see world's lowest ranked team Guam, for whom only participation would be a great satisfaction like Bhutan, Brunei or Macau. Guam's exposure to international football had been severely restricted to the South

pacific Games for many years. Guam, who have yet to win a single international in last ten years, have only recently started participating in AFC tournaments.

There is no group of death in the first stage but for Tajikistan, Kyrgyzstan and Pakistan playing in the same group and the only question that can be raised is about Bangladesh's getting a raw deal in the fixture. Unlike any other tournaments, where the home side usually get easier draws in the knock-out stages, Bangladesh are expected to be pitted against

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Indian footballers practice at the MA Aziz Stadium in Chittagong on Friday.

PHOTO: STAR

India and Taipei confident ahead of openers

AFC.COM from Chittagong

India and Chinese Taipei start as favourites to qualify for the quarterfinals from Group A in the AFC Challenge Cup beginning here today.

India take on Afghanistan in the inaugural match, followed by Chinese Taipei and Philippines.

"We would try to qualify for the second stage as all the teams in our group are of same standard," said India's Uzbek coach Islam Akhmedov.

"First match is always difficult so I am expecting a tough game against Afghanistan tomorrow," he added.

Afghanistan coach Mohammed Yousuf Kargar, however, wants his players to gain more experience from this tournament.

"We have no injury worries and I want our players to go all out tomorrow."

Philippines' coach Aris Caslib, however, was confident of a good showing in the 16-team tournament despite the absence of Youngusband brothers Philip and James, the Chelsea reserves.

"We have many equally talented players and I am sure that they can pull off surprises," he said.

Toshiaki Imai, who took over the reins of Chinese Taipei two months back, said his players have improved since their twin loss at the hands of Iran and Syria in the AFC Asian Cup 2007 qualifiers.

"The players are learning fast and I hope they won't repeat the mistakes. Our aim is to reach the second round," he said.

Bangladesh A crawl back

SPORTS REPORTER

Despite a stubborn batting performance from the middle order, Bangladesh A still conceded a first innings lead of 98 runs to Sri Lanka A on day three of the second Test at the Shaheed Chandu Stadium in Bogra yesterday.

But new ball bowlers Mashrafe Bin Mortaza and Tapash Baisya provided some initiative as they snared a wicket each to reduce Sri Lanka A to 51 for 3 at stumps, an overall lead of 149 runs.

Mashrafe took a wicket in the first over of the visitors second innings as he trapped Kalavittigoda in front for a duck. Tapash then joined in and took the wicket of Ian Daniels before having dangerous Jehan Mubarak run out with the score on 21. Mendes and Warnapura, however, saw off the remaining eleven overs without further damage.

Earlier in the day, overnight batsmen Sakib Al Hasan and wicketkeeper Mushfiqur Rahim put on a century stand for the third wicket with both men scoring sedate half centuries. Southpaw Sakib batted sensibly to score 85 with 9 boundaries while Rahim also chipped in with 50 off 138 balls. However the rest of the batsmen could not capitalise on the good foundation as they succumbed to 368 all out in 123 overs.

For Sri Lanka A, Test-cap Rangana Herath took 4-89 while

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Sanath bids Test bye

AFP, Colombo

Sri Lanka's highest run-scorer Sanath Jayasuriya Friday said he would retire from Test cricket next week to concentrate on the one-day game.

The 36-year-old left-handed opener told AFP he would make his final Test appearance in the second match against Pakistan starting in Kandy on Monday.

"I thought about it long and hard and decided that's it. It's a very emotional moment, but I guess every good thing has to come to an end," he said.

Jayasuriya handed in his letter of resignation to Duleep Mendis, chief executive officer of Sri Lanka Cricket, on Friday.

However, he said he would still be available for selection for next year's World Cup.

The veteran of 101 Tests is Sri Lanka's most prolific batsman in both forms of the game.

But injuries have kept the all-rounder out of the side on a few occasions in the past six months.

After missing the three-match one-day series against Pakistan with a thigh strain he just managed six and 13 runs in the drawn first Test in Colombo.

A former Sri Lanka captain, Jayasuriya's absence in the top of the order will be missed, but it will allow him to fully concentrate on one-day cricket ahead of the World Cup.



Bangladesh football coach Diego Cruciani instructs his charges during a practice session at the Bangladesh Navy ground in Dhaka on Friday.

PHOTO: STAR

Hosts ready to break jinx



SPORTS REPORTER

Even the hardliners would not dream of Bangladesh going all the way in the AFC Challenge Cup which kicks off today but captain Arif Khan Joy is hopeful to get an auspicious start.

Bangladesh play Cambodia in the opener on the inaugural day and Diego Cruciani's boys will be under the microscope when they make an attempt to win their first home match in three years.

"The opening match is very important for any tournament," said midfielder Joy, who is leading a side that last won an international at home during the 2003 SAFF Championship.

"The match against Cambodia is more important because if we win it, we will virtually seal a place in the quarterfinals," said Joy who took victory against world's lowest

(204th) ranked team Guam for granted.

"We have no idea about Cambodia but as far as we are concerned, they are a young side. We also have a few new faces in the side but our core is still with us," said the defensive midfielder referring about his opposition and recent changes in the Bangladesh team.

"With a few senior players gone, I have to take more responsibility," he added.

Bangladesh, who finished runners-up in the SAFF Championship in December 2005 under Argentine coach Cruciani, beat Pakistan on aggregate (1-0) in the Asian Cup pre-qualifiers but lost to Uzbekistan and Hong Kong in the qualifying rounds.

"We are missing a few senior players. Some have been dropped and two key defenders are out through injury. So, we will start with care with concentration on attacking. We will be looking for goals for sure," said Argentine coach Cruciani on the eve of the opener.

"My main worry is my defence. Only one player, Rajani, has played under me. The bunch will need more time and practice to gel together."

He also stated that he needs an improved performance from Joy, whose position is very important.

He has included four new faces in the squad but only right fullback Ebnul Siraji looks set to make his international debut. He will start beside Rajani, Nazrul and Parvez Babu in a four-flat backline.

Recalled after a couple of years, Monwar is also certain to start in midfield with Joy, Abul and, Ujjal who will play the role of Cruciani's 'free midfielder' in a 4-3-1-2 formation.

After missing the Hong Kong match at home for lack of confidence, Aminul returns at goal with Alfaz and young Emily, a skilled striker chosen ahead of experienced fighter Rokonuzzaman

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No selection surprises



SPORTS REPORTER

There was no surprise when Bangladesh Cricket Board (BCB) announced an 18-member preliminary squad for this month's two-match Test and three-match one-day series against Australia at home.

Dashing middle-order batsman Tushar Imran and right-arm pacer Nazmul Hossain were the only notable absentees in the otherwise unchanged list of probables as they were included in Bangladesh A team to play three one-dayers against their Sri Lankan counterparts.

"They were out of the list only because of their commitments with the A side to play three one-dayers. Actually it is completely an unchanged squad but this time I can assure you that we will be flexible. We can call one or two players out of the list if we feel the need to do so at any time during the tour," said chief selector Faruque Ahmed yesterday.

The Tigers start their preparation today at the Sher-e-Bangla Stadium in Mirpur under the supervision of

David Wharmore to face the toughest challenge ever against the world champions, who have already announced a full-strength side for their first ever tour to Bangladesh.

Ricky Ponting's "Invincibles" will arrive in the capital on April 6. The first Test start on April 9 in Dhaka while the second Test takes place in Chittagong from April 16 to April 20.

The national selectors have kept faith with wicketkeeper-cum-batsman Mushfiqur Rahim, who played the second Test against Sri Lanka last month in Bogra although he was not in the preliminary squad.

"He might have failed against Sri Lanka but we still believe that he has the potential to serve the country in the longer-version game. We are trying to find a solid combination -- that's why we went for the same team," said Faruque.

"True we were not fully successful against Sri Lanka in the home series but there were many positives. I think our one-day team has taken a shape following our performances in the last couple of months but we still have to work hard for the longer-version," he added.

Captain Habibur Bashar expressed his satisfaction over the unchanged squad as he thought there was no scope to make any experiments against a team like Australia.

"I think there is hardly any reason to bring changes in the team or call-up new players because we have been playing good cricket for the last few months. Yes, once again I want to say that it would have been nice if we had a very good off-spinner in the squad but there is no one to fill this desire," said Bashar.

SQUAD

Habibur Bashar (capt.), Khaled Mashud, Nafees Iqbal, Mohammad Ashraf, Javed Omar, Rajin Saleh, Aftab Ahmed, Shahrir Nafees, Alok Kapali, Mushfiqur Rahim, Mohammed Rafique, Manjarul Islam Rana, Mashrafe Bin Mortaza, Tapash Baisya, Enamul Haque, Abdur Razzak Raji, Syed Rasel and Shahadat Hossain.

Seamers shake SA



BBC ONLINE, undated

Australia's pace bowlers exploited a helpful pitch to reduce South Africa to 140-4 at tea on the opening day of the third Test in Johannesburg.

Stuart Clark, Brett Lee and Michael Kasprovicz moved the ball menacingly off the seam and shared the wickets.

Lee who produced an absolute beauty to bowl Jacques Kallis, captaining the home side for the first time, for 37.

Herschelle Gibbs (16) paid the price for a glaring misjudgement, offering no shot to a straight one from Kasprovicz.

South Africa went into the game without regular skipper Graeme Smith, who will be out of action for 10 to 12 days after injuring a finger in practice.

It meant a return to opening the batting for Gibbs with Boeta Dippenaar, a regular in the one-day side, making his first Test appearance for 10 months.

Batsman Justin Langer won his 100th Test cap in an unchanged Australia line-up as

they began their bid for a series clean sweep.

Kallis opted to bat first after winning the toss but it was hard going for de Villiers and Gibbs against the new ball.

They managed to stay together until the 14th over until Clark tempted de Villiers into a loose shot on 28 and Damien Martyn took a good catch diving forward.

Gibbs only lasted a further three overs before he inexplicably shouldered arms to a ball from Kasprovicz which hit middle and off.

Dippenaar was in aggressive mood, hitting seven fours in his 32 as he and Kallis steadied the innings with a stand of 59.

But he was then caught behind attempting to drive a wide one from Clark and Kallis followed as a superb off-cutter from Lee found a narrow gap between bat and pad.

Australia then turned to Shane Warne and he also found the pitch to his liking, extracting considerable turn for both his leg-breaks and googlies.

It was a question of survival for

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What to WATCH

BTV
AFC Challenge Cup
India vs Afghanistan
Live at 3:30 pm
Bangladesh vs Cambodia
Live at 6:00 pm
BTV World
AFC Challenge Cup
Palestine vs Guam
Live at 3:30 pm
Chinese Taipei vs Philippines
Live at 6:00 pm
ESPN
South Africa vs Australia
3rd Test, Day Two
Live at 2:30 pm
STAR Sports
English Premier Football League
Birmingham City vs Chelsea
Live at 5:40 pm
Bolton Wanderers vs Man United
Live at 7:55 pm

TALK TURKEY



Carlos Alberto Parreira

(Brazil football coach)
"I don't think that sex one day before the game will have any harm on the player. Just sex, no problem. The problem is, they don't eat, they don't sleep, they smoke and they drink. That is the problem. Sex? No, sex is always very good -- always welcome."

DAY'S EVENT

4-day Test (Day Four)
Bangladesh A vs Sri Lanka A
Venue: Shaheed Chandu Stadium, Bogra
AFC Challenge Cup
India vs Afghanistan (3:30 pm)
Chinese Taipei vs Philippines (6:00 pm)
Venue: MA Aziz Stadium, Chittagong
Palestine vs Guam (3:30 pm)
Bangladesh vs Cambodia (6:00 pm)
Venue: Bangabandhu National Stadium

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Rookies power India



AFP, Faridabad

Teenager Suresh Raina hit an unbeaten 81 to halt an Indian collapse and secure a narrow victory against England in the second one-day international on Friday.

The 19-year-old capitalised on a dropped catch to guide the home team to a four-wicket victory as they reached 230-6 with just one over to spare after being set 227 to win.

Raina's heroics overshadowed the achievement of England batsman Kevin Pietersen, who equalled Vivian Richards' record of reaching 2,000 runs in 21 one-day innings with a characteristically streaky 71.

India were struggling at 122-5 when seamer James Anderson let slip a return catch off the left-handed Raina, holding the ball on his follow-through but dropping it as his elbow hit the ground.

The drop proved costly as Raina and Mahendra Dhoni (38) put on 118 for the sixth wicket.

Raina improvised brilliantly in the later part of his match-winning knock, his best in one-day internationals. He struck one six and eight fours as India took a 2-0 lead in the seven-match series.

"We were very worried when we

lost five wickets," said India captain Rahul Dravid.

"But Raina and Dhoni built a very good stand. They showed a cool head under pressure. England are a very good side and we will have to play well in the remaining matches to win the series."

England had been restricted to just 226 and India also found runs hard to come by on a slow track where the ball turned and kept low to make stroke-making difficult.

But the hosts were strongly placed at 61 without loss before slipping to 92-5.

India had four spinners to exploit the conditions and England just one in Ian Blackwell, who did his best to keep his team in the game with two important wickets.

The left-arm spinner provided the vital breakthrough when he removed Virender Sehwag, who was bowled sweeping. He then dismissed Yuvraj Singh, who chopped the ball on to his stumps.

"I think we put up a decent score and we were very much in the game," said England captain Andrew Flintoff.

"But they (Raina and Dhoni) were involved in a great stand. But there are still five matches to go and we have shown good signs in this game."

India faced a difficult task after losing five wickets in the space of 31 runs, including those of David

and Mohammad Kaif.

Kaif was trapped leg-before by seamer Liam Plunkett, while Dravid was given run out by the third umpire following a brilliant piece of fielding by Paul Collingwood.

India earlier were well-served by little-known Ramesh Powar, who finished with three wickets to restrict England despite impressive half-centuries from Pietersen and opener Andrew Strauss (61).

The off-spinner, with just one wicket in four matches before this game, was difficult to get away as he conceded just 34 in 10 overs.

Strauss and Pietersen were the only batsmen to apply themselves well on a wicket where spinners called the shots.

Flintoff elected to bat after winning the toss in his 100th one-day and Matthew Prior (33) and Strauss gave their team a bright 66-run start. Strauss was also involved in a 64-run stand for the third wicket with Pietersen.

India let off Pietersen twice and Strauss once.

Pietersen was dropped on three and then survived a run-out chance on 27, while Strauss survived on 27 when Powar dropped an easy return catch.

Pietersen went on to smash two

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Indian batsman Suresh Raina looks to play one off the front foot during their second one-day international against England at the Nahar Singh Stadium in Faridabad on Friday.

PHOTO: AFP

Pietersen fastest to 1000

AFP, Faridabad

England batsman Kevin Pietersen on Friday equalled former West Indies captain Vivian Richards's world record as the fastest to score 1,000 runs in one-day internationals.

The Ashes hero reached the landmark in his 21st innings when he scored 71 during the second one-dayer against India here. He was 66 short of the mark before the match.

Pietersen and Richards jointly hold the record of completing 1,000 one-day runs in 21 innings, followed by former West Indies opener Gordon Greenidge (23), New Zealanders Glenn Turner and Pakistan's Yasir Hameed (both 24).

Richards scored 6,721 runs in 187 one-day internationals before retiring in 1991.