

Four cricketers go to Saudi Arabia today

SPORTS REPORTER

Four Bangladeshi cricketers leave Dhaka this morning for Jeddah to take part in two limited-overs exhibition matches between Pakistan XI and Rest of Asia XI.

Ace left-arm spinner Mohammad Rafique, left-handed opener Shahriar Nafees, dashing middle-order batsman Aftab Ahmed and paceman Shahadat Hossain have been selected to represent the Rest of Asia XI.

The matches, organised by Saudi Cricket Centre (SCC), will take place on a special astro-turf pitch at the Al-Ahli Stadium in the port city of Saudi Arabia on May 25 and 26 to promote the game in the Arab nation.

Inzamamul Haq will lead a full-strength Pakistan side against Indian VVS Laxman's Rest of Asia XI.

School soccer

SPORTS REPORTER

Four more schools confirmed their final round berths in the banglalink tiger trophy National School Football Championship by winning their respective zonal finals at different venues across the country yesterday.

Sohel Rana slammed a hattrick as Salampur Dakhil Madrasa won the all-Natore final with a comfortable 4-0 victory over Bagatipara Pilot High School at the Natore Stadium.

On the other hand, the all-Narail battle was won by Pouro Secondary School who beat Lohagora Pilot High School by a 4-2 margin at the Narail Stadium.

At the Kurigram Stadium, two local schools met in the zonal final and Vurungamari Pilot High School blanked Ulipur MF School and College 2-0 to qualify for the final round.

Laxminarayan Cotton Mills School of Narayanganj moved into the final round beating Jodunath Pilot High School of Tangail 4-3 in a tiebreaker after the match was locked 1-1 after the end of regulation time at the Tangail Stadium.

Narayanganj

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Then Haider responded with the leather with five for 26 to dismiss Madaripur for 120 in 35.5 overs.

At the Mymensingh Stadium, Maruf hit 78 as Tangail amassed 253 all out in 50 overs to hand a massive 140-run defeat to Kishoreganj, which were bundled out for 113 runs.

Gaibandha (135-6) registered a four-wicket victory over Noagaon (131 all out) at the Natore Stadium.

Milosevic

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are there to be broken."

Serbia & Montenegro play the Netherlands in their opening Group C match in Leipzig on June 11. They meet Argentina in Gelsenkirchen on June 16 and Ivory Coast in Munich on June 21.

Milosevic said he felt Brazil might not live up to many people's expectations of winning their sixth World Cup and tipped Italy as his personal favourites.

"(Italy) have a perfect mixture of talent, quality, experience and good staff. I don't think either Brazil or Germany will win the World Cup," he said.

Scandal

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the Italians to victory in Spain.

If Italy's players can put the scandal on the backburner they will be confident of mounting a challenge in Germany, where they should in theory emerge from Group E ahead of the Czech Republic, United States and Ghana.

Unbeaten in 16 matches leading into the competition, they have claimed some notable scalps along the way, beating a highly rated Dutch team last year as well as Germany.

Lippi has meanwhile talked up Italy's chances.

"I would put us up there with Brazil; we're inferior to no team," he said before the scandals erupted. "Brazil are the favourites and behind them I would put us, followed by Argentina."

Buffon, speaking before the illegal betting allegations broke, was similarly bullish.

"How do I think we will do at the World Cup? I'm very optimistic and we've set our hearts on winning it. I'm 95 per cent certain we can lift the trophy."

A note of caution for Italy's fans however is the fact that the Azzurri have performed miserably at their last two major tournaments.

They were eliminated in the first round at Euro 2004, and were bundled out in the last 16 by South Korea at the last World Cup.

Unless they really have rediscovered the spirit of 1982, Italy's confidence might be exposed as mere bravado.



Dashing India wicketkeeper-batsman Mahendra Dhoni arrives at the Marriott Hotel in Frigate Bay in Saint Kitts on May 21. PHOTO: AFP

Lara spurs teammates on Third ODI against India today



BBC ONLINE, undated

Skipper Brian Lara says West Indies will have to step up their performance in St. Kitts on Tuesday in the third one-day international against India.

The hosts levelled the series 1-1 with a thrilling last-over win on Saturday.

But Lara said: "We could have got more runs -- losing a few early wickets put pressure on ourselves so we need to grab our opportunities."

"We want to win a lot easier. Each individual has to improve all facets of their game to ensure that happens."

It needed a superb slower yorker from Dwayne Bravo to deny the Indians with two balls left in a low-scoring affair in Kingstown.

After a resounding 5-0 success over Zimbabwe, Lara felt the victory was crucial in helping restore confidence in his team.

The selectors have kept faith the 14 selected for the first two games and the skipper said: "We have some breathing space because we're 1-1 and not 2-0 down so we're

going into the game on Tuesday with optimism.

"It was an important win because we've been playing good cricket and improving."

"It has come to fruition but we have to show what we were doing against Zimbabwe was for a purpose and we have to continue it in St Kitts and the last two games in Trinidad."

"We still think we have a lot of work to do. We do get in positions to win and relax and throw opportunities away."

"That is the key in our game and even in the Test matches we do find ourselves performing well for certain periods of time and can't close it off."

India skipper Rahul Dravid insists his side can also draw encouragement from their performances so far and believes they will help them when they return next year for the World Cup.

"There have been two close games and there is still a lot to play for in the next three games of the series," he explained.

"Our goal has been to keep improving and that's what we'll try to do."

"We are trying to focus on what we need to do and get better as a

team -- that's a good perspective to have because the dressing room is a lot more relaxed."

"These games have been a lesson for us: we are going to come back in nine or 10 months for an important tournament and we have learned the wickets are going to be slow."

"We have to adjust, we will take these lessons and see how we can improve."

India won the opening match by five wickets. The final two one-dayers will be played in Trinidad on May 26 and May 28.

TEAMS

WEST INDIES (from): Brian Lara (captain), Chris Gayle, Runako Morton, Ramnaresh Sarwan, Shivnarine Chanderpaul, Marlon Samuels, Dwayne Smith, Carlton Baugh Jr, Corey Collymore, Fidel Edwards, Jerome Taylor, Ian Bradshaw, Dwayne Bravo and Dave Mohammed.

INDIA (from): Rahul Dravid (captain), Virender Sehwag, Suresh Raina, Yuvraj Singh, Mohammad Kaif, Mahendra Dhoni, Irfan Pathan, Ajit Agarkar, Rudra Pratap Singh, Munaf Patel, Harbhajan Singh, Robin Uthappa, Venugopal Rao and Sri Sreesanth.

BOA to hire swimming coach

BDNEWS, Dhaka

Bangladesh Olympic Association (BOA) is planning to appoint Russian swimming coach Vladimir Shemetov for South Asian (SA) Games to be held in Colombo in August.

BOA officials had a meeting with Ivan A Kravtsov, assistance attache, embassy of the Russian Federation, yesterday to discuss about Shemetov, the 1980 Olympic Games silver medalist.

"We have reached a consensus about the coach and BOA is now waiting for the green signal from Bangladesh Swimming Federation by May 24," said col (ret) Waliullah.

the BOA chief operations officer, adding that the coach would be paid 1,000 dollars as remuneration under the 'intensive training programme'.

India announces Champs Trophy committee

CRICINFO, undated

Ratnakar Shetty, executive secretary in charge of the Board of Control for Cricket in India (BCCI), has been appointed tournament director for the Champions Trophy which will be held in India in October-November, 2006.

Sharad Pawar, the president of the BCCI, has been named chairman of the organising committee, which also includes Niranjan Shah, Raj Singh Durgapur and Lalit Modi. The tournament starts with a match between Sri Lanka and Bangladesh on October 7, while the final will be played in Mumbai on November 5.

COMMITTEE

Ratnakar Shetty (tournament director), Sharad Pawar (chairman), Niranjan Shah (organising secretary), N Srinivasan (member), MP Pandove (member), IS Bindra (member), Raj Singh Durgapur (member), Lalit Modi (member), Narhari Amin (member), Nikhil Kumar (security consultant).

Martina climbs

AFP, Paris

Martina Hingis' win in Rome on Sunday has earned her a place in the top 15 in the latest WTA world rankings released on Monday.

Hingis, who was winning for the first time since her comeback in January, moved up seven places to 14th behind world number one Amelie Mauresmo.

The beaten finalist in Rome, Dinara Safina, was up three places to 16th.

There was no change in the top ten with Kim Clijsters lying second and Nadia Petrova in third.

TOP TWENTY

| | |
|----------------|------|
| Mauresmo | 3272 |
| Clijsters | 3048 |
| Petrova | 2620 |
| Sharapova | 2543 |
| Henin-Hardenne | 2408 |
| Pierce | 2302 |
| Davenport | 2254 |
| Dementieva | 1990 |
| Schnyder | 1753 |
| Kuznetsova | 1711 |
| Schiavone | 1356 |
| Myskina | 1309 |
| V Williams | 1308 |
| Hingis | 1160 |
| Groenefeld | 1133 |
| Safina | 1099 |
| Hantuchova | 1018 |
| Vaidisova | 1014 |
| Pannetta | 991 |
| Likhovtseva | 945 |

I can beat Nadal in Paris: Federer

AFP, Barcelona

Roger Federer believes he is close to figuring out how to beat nemesis Raphael Nadal on clay and that he could do so in the final of the French Open on June 11.

Federer lost for the fifth time in six meetings to the young Spaniard in an enthralling Italian Open final earlier this month squandering two match points before going down in a fifth-set tie-break.

The Swiss superstar will have to reverse the trend in Paris if he is to achieve his dream of becoming the first player since Rod Laver to win all four Grand Slam titles inside 12 months.

"I have to play him more often to figure him out and that is what I have been doing. I think I am getting closer and closer," said Federer who broke off from his preparations in the French capital to attend the annual Laureus World Sports Awards, which he won for the first time last year.

"I don't think I need to change anything in the way I play him. I should have won in Rome. I was just one shot away from doing that, so it could happen in Paris."

"But I am not focussing on him right now. We can only meet in the final and I can only focus on my section of the draw."

The 24-year-old world No.1 said he had pulled out of the last week's German Open as he had felt desperately tired after losing the five-hour marathon in Rome.

"I really wanted to play, but the final took too much out of me and I had to look at the long run," he said. "I was thinking I could not have managed starting on the Tuesday and then playing six times after that over two weeks to win the title."

But Federer said the time off had helped him recuperate and he was fully fit and ready to challenge for the one Grand Slam title he has yet to win, his best performance being a semi-final loss to Nadal last year.

He has already been practicing in Paris with coach Tony Roche and travels back to the French capital on Tuesday after the Laureus awards to complete his build-up.

"I am in really good shape and my preparations could not have gone better although the weather in Paris has been very bad," he said.

Asia hard

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will be a special game. The Croatian game has a history of itself because of a lot of connections between Australia-Croatia so that will be a very hectic clash at the end."

Iran's campaign gets underway on June 11 against Mexico before they take on Portugal and Angola.

Now ranked 22 in the world, Branko Ivankovic has developed them into what many consider to be the country's best team in decades, with the likes of Ali Karimi and captain Ali Daei his linchpins.

Their key task is to make the second round, something they failed to do in their only other appearances at the World Cup, in 1978 and 1998.

Of all Asia's representatives, Saudi Arabia have the toughest task. Drawn against Spain, Tunisia and Ukraine, they are led by veteran striker Sami Al Jaber and goalkeeper Mohamed Al Deayea, who both make their fourth appearance in the World Cup.

But in two World Cup appearances since their breakthrough in 1994, when they made the second round, they have yet to win a match, taking only one point from six games.

That poor sequence of results included a humiliating 8-0 drubbing by Germany at the 2002 finals, where they froze on the world stage.



AND SHE'S BACK: Martina Hingis of Switzerland kisses the trophy after winning the Rome Masters on Sunday. PHOTO: AFP

Hingis full of hopes



AFP, Rome

Martina Hingis will be hoping that recent history repeats itself as she returns to Roland Garros for the first time in five years a week after winning the Rome Masters.

The 25-year-old Swiss capped her remarkable return to tennis and set her sights on the French Open after overcoming late resistance from Dinara Safina to lift her first title since reversing her retirement last January, winning 6-2, 7-5 on Sunday.

The former world number one, who began the season with no ranking, had quit the sport in late 2002 due to foot and ankle injuries.

She will enter Paris with an estimated world ranking of 14.

"I always like it (Roland Garros) because it plays more like a hard court," said Hingis, who was considering breaking training with a celebratory glass of wine on her last night in the Eternal City.

"And I love the city (Paris). The stadiums are very nice; they always play well. Now I just hope to play the same tennis as I did this week."

Hingis won the Rome title for the second time after a victory in 1998 over Venus Williams.

"They say never give up hope and keep fighting, and here I am," said the champion. "It's just great to be back on top of the game."

"I never thought I'd be here again."

Hingis, 25, claimed the 41st singles title of a career which began with five Grand Slam crowns all earned as a teenager.

She last won on clay in Hamburg six years ago and claimed her last title on any surface in Tokyo ten months before her October 2002, retirement.

She stands 31-10 since returning to the game in January.

While not touting herself as a Paris protagonist, the confident Hingis is not discounting her chances either.

"You can't go in and think like, 'I'm gonna lose' before you go out there. I've played great matches against the top players."

"And the pressure is on them, it's not on me. But a Grand Slam is a different time to play. There are definitely players who have been around for the last three years when I was gone and they've won the majors."

"They've been out there and playing well. But I think I'm very close."

Hingis will be expecting more of herself now that she's bagged another title less than six months into her against-the-odds comeback.

"With winning this event, I know that I can do it again. Everyone was asking and probably I was asking myself as well: Can I really win another tournament?"

"Can I get it that far and actually do it?"

"Now I did it, the ball is in my court. I feel like I definitely have it in me."

No more

FROM PAGE 17 well we want to do something big at this World Cup."

Spain, who have been drawn with Ukraine, Tunisia and Saudi Arabia in Group H, meet up in Madrid on Monday to begin their preparations for the World Cup.

They play a warm-up match against Russia in Albacete on Saturday, followed by a week's further training in Valencia and a friendly against African champions Egypt in Elche on June 3.

They complete their preparations with a match against fellow World Cup qualifiers Croatia in Geneva on June 7 and open their campaign against Ukraine in Leipzig a week later.

Germany's injury

FROM PAGE 20 month before he can rejoin the main group.

Mike Hanke and Tim Borowski both missed out on training on Wednesday with colds.

The World Cup hosts get the tournament underway against Costa Rica in Munich on June 9.



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Rooney damaged the fifth metatarsal bone in his right foot in Manchester United's 3-0 defeat at Chelsea on April 29 and has been in a race against time to be fit for England's first match against Paraguay on June 10.

He has not kicked a ball since picking up the injury but was photographed riding a bicycle at United's training ground 11 days ago.

"He can put pressure on his foot now with the special protection he is wearing," said Sward.

"It seems Wayne Rooney has the gift of healing quickly but it's not that strange. Young people have that gift, much more than older patients."

Pressure on referees

AP, London

Players going to the World Cup know that, if they make a big blunder in their first game, they probably won't play another.

According to World Cup-bound Graham Poll, the same applies to the referees.

"If you make a big mistake in your first game, it will be your last game, and that's something that has been made very clear to us," said Poll, one of 22 referees headed for the June 9-July 22 championship in Germany.

"The message is very, very clear. You have got to allow people to

BITS AND BOBS

make decisions and do their very best. But there is a very, very high standard expected."

Poll, England's only referee at the World Cup, also took part in the 2002 event in South Korea and Japan.

"What I do, money can't buy," he told BBC Radio Five. "It's something that's a massive challenge. It's a huge challenge to try to control 22 top-class athletes playing football with a whistle and two cards as your friends."

"It's a huge, huge challenge. Maybe you don't always get the recognition you think you deserve. But you know yourself when you have done a good job and you know when you have made a mistake."

Pauleta promises goals

AFP, Lisbon

Paris Saint-Germain's Portuguese striker Pedro Pauleta, who failed to score during Euro 2004, has promised to fire in the goals during the World Cup in Germany.

"Being the top scorer at the World Cup is a dream that I can't hide," he told reporters in southern Portugal at a national team training camp held ahead of the start of the tournament on June 9, sports daily Record reported.

Pauleta is Portugal's all-time

leading scorer with 43 goals in 80 games, shattering Eusebios record of 41 goals in 64 matches. His 11 strikes in the World Cup qualifiers made him Eurotopes top marksman.

"The goal of 50 goals appeals to me and I think of it. After having achieved various goals over the years I would like to achieve one more and 50 goals is a target," the 33-year-old said.

"People talk a lot about my performance at Euro 2004 but sometimes they forget the good things I have already achieved for the national squad," he added.

Pauleta, who has sparked interest from Lyon, has yet to decide whether to see out the remaining year of his contract with Paris Saint-Germain.

"Maybe a few years ago I would be anxious to resolve any possible transfer as quickly as possible but today that doesn't worry me. I have one year left on my contract with Paris Saint-Germain and the only proposal that interests me at the moment is the national team," he said.

Portugal are pooled with Mexico, Iran and Angola in World Cup Group D with their first match against debutants Angola in Cologne on June 11.