

Drug duo may be let off lightly

PTI, Karachi

Barrister Shahid Hamid, who heads the drugs inquiry tribunal probing the positive dope tests of pacers Shoaib Akhtar and Mohammad Asif, has admitted there is a point of view that they should be handed out a punishment that makes them available for next year's World Cup.

Hamid made these comments while responding to queries from a bench of the Supreme Court in Islamabad headed by Chief Justice Chaudhry Iftikhar Ahmed.

Although Hamid appeared before the bench in connection with another case, the Chief Justice and other judges inquired from him about the doping case and expressed disappointment with the performance of Pakistan in the Champions Trophy.

Hamid, a well-known senior barrister, told them there was a view to save the two bowlers for the World Cup but another view was to hand them out strict punishment for bringing shame on the country.

Shoaib and Asif were recalled from the Champions Trophy in India two weeks ago for failing a dope test and testing positive for banned steroid nandrolone.

The tests were conducted internally by the Pakistan Cricket Board so the punishment for the offence will be decided by the tribunal although international doping regulations warrant a two-year ban for a first violation.

Yuvraj blow

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available for the subsequent three-Test series in South Africa. Board of Control for Cricket in India secretary Niranjan Shah said.

"According to the doctor, there is a tear in the anterior cruciate ligament with some amount of bruising of the bone in the left knee and there is also a swelling of the knee," said Shah.

Wicketkeeper-batsman Dinesh Karthik, who was put on stand-by on Monday, will take Yuvraj's place in the 16-man squad which leaves for South Africa on November 13.

Seamer Ajit Agarkar, who broke his left thumb against the West Indies last week, will undergo a fitness test on November 10 in Mumbai, Shah added.

If Agarkar is declared unfit, he will be replaced by young fast bowler Vikram Rajvir Singh.

Absence irks

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knocking at the door, so we should rely on a proven combination. It will be fantastic if we can play the whole series with the same team," demanded Bashir.

He said that they will try hard to find out a new opening pair during the series as makeshift opener Mohammad Ashraf has expressed his desire not to consider him as a partner of Shahriar Nafees.

"It's an area where we've been struggling most. We tried Ashraf but the play didn't click and he has already wished not to consider him. I think it would be our challenge to establish a new pair in the series," he explained.

Bashir also talked about the bad patch of Ashraf, who was given rest for the last match against Zimbabwe. "The whole team is backing him but the reality is he has to solve his own problem. He might be confused with his game but we have clearly given him the message that he should play his natural game," added Bashir.

SA want

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do that because we lost too many wickets upfront," he said.

"So if we keep wickets in hand in this game, it will allow our batsmen down the order to do that and I do believe we are getting strong as the competition goes on. If we get our things right, we believe we can beat any side."

The West Indies have been on a roll during Brian Lara's third stint as captain, having beaten India in May, qualified for a triangular series final at Kuala Lumpur last month and won four of their six matches in this tournament.

They may have lost 5-0 in their last one-day series against South Africa at home in 2005, but are expected to put up a stiff resistance this time.

The West Indies' two defeats in this tournament came in 'dead' matches, against Sri Lanka when they had made it to the main draw, and then against England when they had qualified for the semifinals.

The West Indies batting was the talking point, with left-hander opener Chris Gayle showing the way with two centuries in six matches. He is also the tournament's second-highest scorer with 304 runs.

They are the only side with two century-makers in their ranks. Dwayne Bravo being the other. Lara, Runako Morton, Shivnarine Chanderpaul, Ramnareh Sarwan have one half-century to their credit.



Bangladesh captain Habibur Bashar (2nd from L) hands over the tickets of the ICC Champions Trophy final to three lucky winners (C) of GrameenPhone's SMS Quiz Contest at a function in the city yesterday.

Tests, ODIs of same value

AFP, London

England do place an equal priority upon one-day internationals as they do Test matches, chairman of selectors David Graveney has insisted.

Graveney, who described England's group stage elimination from the ongoing Champions Trophy tournament in India as "very disappointing," insisted the side did care about one-day cricket.

In recent years a notable gap has appeared between England's form in five-day and one-day cricket.

The trend continued this month with Champions Trophy reverses against India and Australia.

England great Geoffrey Boycott said results proved what little the current team thought of one-day cricket.

But Graveney said: "Nobody is sitting on their hands and not rating one-day cricket as important as Test match cricket. For me, it is equally important."

"People are not just dismissing the way we have played and the statistics we have from the last 20-odd games."

"We continue to work on it and try to find the right combinations to win one-day games."

But he accepted that England's performances in India had been sub-standard.

"It was very disappointing. Despite what a lot of people said, we went there to win the tournament -- so if you do not win it and you are out before the first stage is over then it is obviously disappointing."

England twice failed to post a challenging score -- before chasing a target to win a dead match against semifinalists and holders West Indies.

And it was those batting problems, regardless of paceman Stephen Harmison's waywardness with the new ball, which Graveney said was the major concern.

"You are not going to win too many matches if you are bowled out for 120 and 160 and you don't manage to bat through your overs," he reasoned.

"The boys worked extremely hard on their fitness -- not just for this tournament but for the Ashes too -- but we have to say we came up short."

England's stunning 2005 Ashes victory further strengthened the belief already prevalent among many English cricket followers that it is Test cricket, not the one-day game, that really matters even though it is only a few months until the World Cup gets underway in the Caribbean in March.

"It is true that some people who support English cricket are only interested in Test matches," Graveney admitted.

"But we know we have to earn the support we get for one-day games -- you do not have that by right -- and you do that by putting up good performances and winning matches."

"We have not done that and we know we have work to do."

However, the former county spin bowler said the international schedule sometimes worked against England.

"We always have an Ashes series before a World Cup -- which obviously slightly affects our preparation going into the tournament," he said.

"But it will be great viewing time (in the Caribbean) for the UK this time, and we will be doing everything we can to realise our potential."

Meanwhile Graveney was heartened by the return to all-round fitness in India of England captain Andrew Flintoff.

"They did well to win that match against the West Indies -- that showed a lot of character."

"There are plus points, in Kevin Pietersen's batting in that game and the fact Andrew Flintoff came through -- bowling two spells, which was quite important," he explained.

Poms ponder twin spin option

BBC ONLINE, undated

England should take a risk and play two spinners for the majority of the Ashes series, according to John Emburey.

England have been boosted by the return to fitness of Ashley Giles, who could bowl in tandem with fellow left-armed Monty Panesar in Australia.

"There is no reason why the spinners should not play if you feel they are going to be potential match-winning bowlers," Emburey told BBC Sport.

"If it is Giles and Panesar then they should both play."

Emburey, a member of the last England team to win the Ashes on Australian soil in 1986/87, dismissed suggestions that England should not play two left-arm spinners in the same team.

"We have gone on tour with three off-spinners in the past -- if they are the two best spin bowlers in the country then they should play. I don't see it as a problem," said the Middlesex coach.

Sydney and Adelaide have traditionally been the two venues which favour the two-spinner option. But reports in Australia have suggested that Perth, normally the fastest pitch in the country, has slowed considerably, further strengthening the argument to play both Giles and Panesar.

However Emburey warned the plan could backfire if the pitches do not turn in the first few days of a Test match.

USA accepts

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quarterfinals of the 2002 World Cup but was eliminated in the first round of this year's tournament in Germany.

Arena subsequently was hired by MLS's New York Red Bulls and Gulati has said he plans to announce a replacement by the end of next month.

United lose

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on Saturday and we have another Saturday match this week, which doesn't make it any easier for us in terms of the injury situation," said Ferguson.

"But we do have players like Wes Brown and Gabriel Heinze to come in so things are not so bad."

United only need a point to seal their passage into the knockout phase, and are full of confidence after recording seven straight wins in all competitions.

"I am delighted with the form of the team," said Ferguson. "We want to make sure we qualify tomorrow. That is a priority for us."

Blatter meant

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"With my statement I simply wanted to pay credit to the Socceros as well because they played a great match and their lack of experience did not permit them to go to extra-time," he said.

The FIFA statement also quoted Les Murray, the editorial supervisor of SBS Sport, as saying that at no time in it did Blatter make any "inappropriate comment" about the Italy v Australia match.

"The topic as to whether the controversial penalty kick awarded to Italy in the last moments of the game was justified or not never even came up during our interview," Murray said.

'Adjustment worked'

AFP, Jaipur

In-form West Indies opener Chris Gayle said Tuesday that adjustment to Indian pitches was the key to his success in the ongoing Champions Trophy.

"The wickets are playing much slower and lower than when I was here last (in 2002). So I try to make adjustments out in the middle. It is working for me," Gayle said ahead of Thursday's semifinal against South Africa.

"There is a lot of difference in my batting now. First, I try to access the wickets as quickly as possible. I am just trying to play straight. When I get a start, I try to capitalise on it and not give it away."

Gayle is the second batsman after Sri Lankan Upul Tharanga to hammer two centuries in the tournament, scoring an unbeaten 104 against Bangladesh in the qualifying round and 101 against England in the last Group-A match.

"The hundred (against England) in the last match was very pleasing. I

also got good support from (Dwayne) Bravo in the last game," said the 27-year-old Jamaican.

"I am looking forward to the semifinal and hopefully I can transfer that form to this game as well."

Gayle is also the tournament's second-highest scorer after Tharanga (320 runs) with 304 and has grabbed eight wickets with his tidy off-spin.

"I don't concentrate much on my bowling. I have always paid more attention to my batting. I am a bowler who can come and just get the job done at times."

Gayle said defending champions West Indies had been improving with every match in recent months and the opposition would have to play really good cricket to take the title from them.

"It has been a long tour for us ... from Malaysia to India and then the qualifying games. It has put us in the cricket frame of mind," said Gayle, whose side qualified for the tri-series final in Kuala Lumpur.

"We are playing a lot of cricket and the more cricket we play, the better for us. It has been working so far. We are the defending champions and the teams will have to come hard at us if they want to take it away."

Gayle said his team had to maintain the consistency although they knew the conditions better than South Africa, who would be playing their first game here.

"We have played on this wicket before and know what to expect," said Gayle, who has so far scored 5,406 runs and taken 126 wickets in 149 one-day internationals.

"But the South Africans have been really impressive in their last two games. They will be coming really hard at us. We will just have to back ourselves, and go out there and get the job done."

The West Indies opener said he did not believe the defeat against England in the last league match would affect his team's chances.

"It was not a major setback for us," he said.

"Obviously, we wanted to win every match, but (Kevin) Pietersen played a really good innings. We just have to play better in the semifinal against South Africa."

Pietersen smashed an unbeaten 90 as England surpassed the West Indies' total of 272-4 with nine balls to spare, but the West Indies had already qualified for the semifinals.

All's not lost: Woolmer

AFP, Karachi

Pakistan are still on track for next year's cricket World Cup despite their early Champions Trophy exit, but the team must learn quickly from their mistakes, coach Bob Woolmer said Monday.

"We are a good side and can play good cricket. It is important we look how we lost, learn from mistakes and look at things carefully before the World Cup," Woolmer told AFP.

Pakistan, already without two key bowlers after a drugs scandal, crashed out of the Champions Trophy with a 124-run defeat against South Africa in Mohali on Friday, their second loss in three matches.

Woolmer, who played 19 Tests for England and also coached South Africa between 1994-99, blamed recent events away from the pitch for Pakistan's lacklustre performance.

"I am not making any excuses,

but off-field events of the last two months had a bearing. How do you expect a team to perform adequately after all this? But despite adversity they played out of their skins against Sri Lanka," said Woolmer, 58.

Pakistan were without their inspirational captain Inzamam-ul-Haq as he was serving a ban for bringing the game into disrepute during August's Oval Test against England. Inzamam had protested over allegations of ball tampering.

He was cleared of the tampering charges but was handed a four-match ban for his protest.

His replacement Younis Khan dramatically refused to lead the side, saying he did not want to be a dummy captain. That was followed by the resignation of the Pakistan Cricket Board chairman Shaharyar Khan, whose replacement brought back Younis.

Then paceman Shoaib Akhtar and Mohammad Asif were revealed to have tested positive for steroids a day before team's opening match against Sri Lanka at Jaipur.

Both were recalled from India and face a two-year ban pending an inquiry.

"Take (Ricky) Ponting, (Brett) Lee and (Glenn) McGrath out of the Australian team then see how they fare. In the same way Pakistan missed Inzamam, Asif and Akhtar and all three are important for Pakistan's World Cup campaign," said Woolmer.

Woolmer also blamed the Mohali pitch for Pakistan's dismal batting.

"People say we are not good on bouncy pitches like at Perth, Old Trafford and Mohali. In 2005, I asked the PCB for concrete pitches so that we can try and replicate them" but the request was never passed, he said.

Pakistan start a short training camp later this week to prepare for their three-Test and five one-day match home series against the West Indies.

The first Test starts in Lahore from November 11.

Senate probes Oval Test

CRICINFO, undated

The Oval Test forfeiture and the long-awaited constitution were on the menu of discussion as Nasim Ashraf, the new Pakistan Cricket Board (PCB) chairman, faced a Senate committee on sports over the recent turbulence that has gripped Pakistan cricket.

A member of the committee, Senator Enver Baig, said that a detailed discussion was held on the Oval Test and the chairman subsequently agreed to hold a thorough probe into the affair. Baig revealed to Karachi-based daily Dawn that Ashraf had initially refused to speak before the committee about the Oval incident but later admitted that the decision of staging the post-Test boycott on the fourth day was the sole decision of captain Inzamamul Haq.

All the officials present at the Oval including myself, manager Zaheer Abbas and Bob Woolmer tried hard to convince Inzamam to

return to the ground but he refused to comply," Ashraf was quoted as saying. Inzamam had repeatedly stressed that he had the support of his teammates in the decision.

More damagingly, Baig voiced concerns over the result in light of reports that a leading British bookmaker was offering odds on an England win. "We informed him that the bookie was offering 14-1 rate in favour of England while the match was in Pakistan's pocket."

Baig said he told Ashraf that the PCB should not overlook the bookies factor since match-fixing allegations have been levelled against the players in the past. "The matter is a serious one and you should consider all the aspects and an inquiry should be held into the affair."

Meanwhile, the long-absent constitution of the board was also discussed and Ashraf assured the committee that it would be in place by January 31, 2007. Ashraf said that the constitution is almost finalised and would be implemented following approval from President Pervez Musharraf, the board's patron-in-chief.

"For us, it is very important that the PCB has a constitution and is run according to it as soon as possible," Baig told The News. "We have been told by the PCB chairman that the constitution would be ready soon and would be implemented by January 31 next year. We would get back to him on February 1 over this matter."

Baig also said that the constitution should lead to the board having a chairman who is elected by representatives of its provincial association and other affiliated units. "There should not be any direct appointments in the board by the president of Pakistan. The president is the patron-in-chief of the PCB but we believe he should not be involved in the working of the board."

This is not the first time the committee has called in the PCB chairman. Through his three-year tenure, Shaharyar Khan, Ashraf's predecessor, was summoned to face questions on a number of occasions over the board's finances and the team's performances.

Paris suffers setback

AFP, Paris

Roger Federer blew a gaping hole in the credibility of the Paris Masters on Monday when the world number one joined Rafael Nadal in pulling out of the two-million-euro tournament.

The Swiss top seed cited fatigue for his no-show, the third year in succession he has opted out of the penultimate event of the season.

Nadal, who has never played the tournament, pulled out on Sunday with a stomach muscle injury.

ATP chief Etienne de Villiers was furious with the developments which followed the earlier withdrawals of fellow top tenners, David Nalbandian, Ivan Ljubicic and Andy Roddick.

"I'm deeply disappointed and concerned by the depletion in the field," said the South African. "Unfortunately this is the third year that withdrawals and injuries have hurt the event. This reinforces my determination to introduce meaningful change to the calendar, the structure, the incentives and sanctions needed to have healthy, motivated top players grace our top events."

Beleaguered organisers were forced to hand Federer's place in the draw to Russian lucky loser Teimuraz Gabashvili who gets a bye into the second round.

Comparisons between the two make grim reading with Federer, the owner of 44 titles and 27 million dollars prize money, replaced by the world number 130 who has banked a modest 278,000 dollars.

Little wonder spectators voted with their feet with the 13,000-capacity Palais Omnisports venue barely a third-full on Monday.

However, former triple champion Marat Safin did his best to save the day with a 6-1, 7-6 win over France's Nicolas Mahut which kept him on course to be seeded at the Australian Open in January.

The charismatic Russian, whose ranking slipped to 104 in the summer after a year dogged by injuries, came into Paris at 34 in the world.

Against a hapless Mahut, former world number one Safin fired down 17 aces in his 74-minute win.

Federer, who wrapped up his 11th title of the season on Sunday, when he won his hometown Basel tournament, had hinted that he would withdraw in order to save himself for the Masters Cup in Shanghai from November 12.

His win over Fernando

Gonzalez in Basel was his 92nd match of 2006.

Tournament co-director Cedric Pioline admitted that the scheduling of events was at the heart of the problem.

"There's a problem with the structure of the calendar between Masters Series events and other tournaments," he said.

"The only penalty of any use would be suspension. It's the only thing the players understand because financial penalties won't make any difference."

Federer has had a hectic three weeks winning the titles in Tokyo, the Madrid Masters and then Basel. "I've played a lot," he said after his straight sets win over Gonzalez on Sunday.

"This is my 92nd match of the season, I have to be careful."

The withdrawal of the world top three left Russia's Nikolay Davydenko as the highest ranked player in Paris.

Federer and Nadal, who has been replaced by Sweden's Robin Soderling, have already qualified for the Masters Cup as have Ljubicic, Roddick and Davydenko which leaves three more places in the eight-man field up for grabs.