



The first international football match at Bangabandhu National Stadium in close to 10 months drew a massive crowd yesterday with most of the 8,000-capacity filled up before the kick-off. Bangladesh eased to a 2-0 victory over Nepal in the first of the two FIFA friendlies. PHOTO: FIROZ AHMED

## Day happy with win in 'pre-season game'

SPORTS REPORTER



As soon as the official post-match press conference following Bangladesh's 2-0 victory against Nepal last night ended, the Bangladesh team's media manager relayed to the journalists an announcement that the National Teams Committee would reward the team with Tk 10 lakh for winning the match.

The victory meant much to the governing body of the federation, who have recently been re-elected and have been desperate for success at the international stage for some time.

The win will also provide respite to the men in red and green, who ended a five-year winless streak against Nepal, with the balance of power tilting towards the Himalayan nation in recent times.

Although Bangladesh coach Jamie Day was pleased with the result, he found areas for improvement.

"I'm very pleased with the win and that we killed the game from a counter-attack even though we could have scored more in the first half. I'm also happy that there were no serious injuries."

**JAMIE DAY, BANGLADESH COACH**

even though we could have scored more in the first half. I'm also happy that there were no serious injuries," the 41-year-old said. "However, I'm not getting carried away. Nepal played better than us in the second half, they had more possession and controlled the game better," the coach said as Bangladesh hardly matched their first-half performance on the other side of the break against a Nepal side which had been decimated by Covid-19.

The coach attributed the lack of control in the second-half to a long break as the national team players were out of competitive football since mid-March due to the pandemic.

"This is just a pre-season game for me and there will be greater competition coming up, so we need to get better," the coach said, referring to the upcoming World Cup qualifier against Qatar next month and the remaining qualifiers next year.

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## Booters celebrate return with clinical win

SPORTS REPORTER



Bangladesh made a winning return to international football amid the coronavirus pandemic, handing Nepal a 2-0 defeat in the first of two international friendlies at the Bangabandhu National Stadium yesterday.

After missing out on January's Bangabandhu Gold Cup, striker Nabib Newaj Jibon celebrated his return to national colours with a superb goal in the first half before substitute Mahbubur Rahman Sufil wrapped up victory 10 minutes from time to ensure Bangladesh's first win over the Himalayan outfit in five years. Bangladesh last beat Nepal in a friendly match in Dhaka as part of their preparation for the 2015 SAFF Championship in Kerala, India.

All concerns about attendance

were extinguished by the presence of more than 8,000 enthusiastic spectators who packed the big bowl, inspiring the booters to a morale-boosting win after eight months' break from the game due to the pandemic.

On the less auspicious side, the spectators were hardly maintaining social distance and very few were wearing masks as they beat drums and waved the national flag to cheer the boys in red and green. The players appreciated the support, with skipper Jamal Bhuiyan venturing close to the fence to greet the adoring crowd after the match.

Heading into the match, both sides said the focus would be on quality of performance rather than result. The match was a hard-fought one, but the hosts looked better in terms of fitness and cohesion.

Nepal, who got less than two weeks to prepare, appeared slower

than their usual pace but they were nonetheless impressive when building the game from behind even without five to six vital payers who either chose not to come or tested Covid-19 positive.

Bangladesh head coach Jamie Day brought four changes to the squad that played against Burundi in January during the Bangabandhu Gold Cup, with goalkeeper Anisur Rahamn Zico and striker Suman Reza making their international debuts.

As per the commitment to give players more match time before the World Cup qualifier against Qatar in December, the British coach also sent five pairs of fresh legs after the break in place of Suman, Jamal Bhuiyan, Manik Mollah, Nabib Newaj Jibon and Yeasin Khan and Bangladesh looked a bit better in the last 15 minutes with Sufil scoring a brilliant strike.

Having the edge in fitness, Bangladesh looked positive from

the word go and did not allow the opponents any space inside the danger area while Abahani duo -- Jibon and Saad Uddin -- appeared to have a good understanding as Jibon put Bangladesh ahead in the 10th minute after a brilliant run and nutmeg from Saad in the right flank.

Jibon went close again but his volley went inches wide on the half-hour mark after Ravishankar Paswan spoiled a nice opportunity to level the margin.

After resumption, both sides sent fresh legs and Nepal created two or three good chances but could not convert those before Sufil, availing a timely through-pass from substitute Sohail Rana, embarked on a brilliant run to the box from the left flank before placing a curving shot to the far post to seal victory in the 80th minute.

The second and final match will take place on Tuesday.



Mahbubur Rahman Sufil celebrates Bangladesh's second goal against Nepal at the Bangabandhu National Stadium yesterday. PHOTO: FIROZ AHMED



## Messi loses his cool

AGENCIES, BUENOS AIRES

It is unusual to see Lionel Messi upset with the referee. The Argentine star has been fouled constantly throughout his career but has always focused on his own business. However, he couldn't help but get mad with the Brazilian referee Raphael Claus during his country's 1-1 draw in a World Cup qualifier against Paraguay at La Bombonera on Thursday.

Messi, who was playing through an ankle injury, was left dismayed when Paraguay were awarded a first-half penalty for Lucas Martinez Quarta's challenge on Newcastle's Miguel Almiron in the 21st minute, incensed because Argentina were denied a spot-kick for a similar challenge moments earlier. Messi approached the referee to contend the decision and remind the official that four minutes earlier there had been a very similar play at the other end of the pitch and he gave nothing. Messi appeared to give Argentina a lead in the 57th, but a video reviewed decision by Brazilian referee Raphael Claus found a foul for Paraguay 27 seconds earlier when the ball was still in Argentina's half.

The Barcelona man celebrated his goal wildly, especially since it capped a fabulous 15-pass move, but the joy was short-lived as Claus went over to his monitor before bringing play back. "Two times you've s\*\*\*\*ed us," Messi reportedly told referee Claus after the goal was ruled out. On the sidelines, the Argentina bench also exploded after seeing the review of the goal on the monitor. "Disgraceful," shouted coach Scaloni.

The decision meant Argentina had to settle for one point in a game in which they had more of both the possession and the chances after going behind to a first-half penalty.

"I think there has to be a way of uniting the themes of the VAR," Scaloni said. "I'm not speaking of good or bad faith, but in uniting the criteria." "We are left with a bitter sweet taste because Argentina did everything to win. In the second half we pinned our opponents back. We also have to recognise the team's attitude in always believing they could win."

## Clouds gather over England tour of SA

AGENCIES, JOHANNESBURG

England's imminent tour of South Africa could hang on the outcome of a CSA members' council meeting on Friday, according to the interim board proposed by government.

"I don't know what the thinking is in England, but I have no doubt that if the members' council doesn't take a proper decision this evening England will probably be seriously discouraged from coming," Zak Yacoob told a press conference on Friday.

Yacoob, a former Constitutional Court judge, was appointed by sports minister Nathi Mthethwa to lead the proposed interim board on October 30. Word from England's camp at this stage is that it's "business as usual" for the tour. They are due to arrive on Monday to play South Africa in six white-ball internationals, starting on November 27.

## Troubled France in Ronaldo's sights



With some key players absent due to injury and others having just recovered, Antoine Griezmann will be expected to spearhead France in their UEFA Nations League match against Portugal tonight. Meanwhile, Cristiano Ronaldo will be hoping to take more steps towards history.

PHOTO: FFF/TWITTER

AGENCIES, LISBON

The UEFA Nations League is back with its penultimate round of fixtures in the group stages and the marquee fixture of the fifth matchday sees a rematch of the 2016 Euro final, with Portugal hosting France at the Estadio do SL Benfica on Saturday.

The Selecao come into the game on the back of a thumping 7-0 win over Andorra and with Cristiano Ronaldo itching to get a step closer to Ali Daei's record of the most international goals, who got 107 for Iran.

Portugal coach Fernando Santos

as confident ahead of the match, implying that the team had bigger concerns than a single group-stage match. However, he expressed full belief in his team.

"There is a clear objective, which is to get to the final four and try to defend the title. We can take the opportunity to look at players from our extended squad. Paulinho and Pedro Neto are part of that list of 40 or 50 players that I think are all very good. There are none of them that I do not trust or do not have quality."

France could not boast the same confidence as the world champions are facing some pressure following a shock 2-0 defeat at the hands of

Finland on Thursday and coach Didier Deschamps hoped that some of his players could return from injury. Les Bleus were without Kylian Mbappe, Presnel Kimpembe, Kingsley Coman, Benjamin Pavard and Lucas Hernandez for that game at the Stade de France.

"It's going in the right direction," Deschamps was quoted as saying by French sports daily L'Equipe on Thursday after Finland ended their 12-match unbeaten streak. He added that he was "not sure of anything" concerning Mbappe and Pavard, who were out of the Finland game with a thigh problem and an ankle injury, respectively.

## No quarantine for England in Sri Lanka

STAR SPORT DESK

After Bangladesh's tour of Sri Lanka was scrapped in September after the two boards failed to agree on Covid-19 quarantine protocols laid out by Sri Lankan authorities, Sri Lanka Cricket decided that England would not have to deal with such strict protocols when they tour for two Tests in January next year.

Lankan media Daily FT reported that England have agreed on the Test tour with both games slated to be played at the Galle International Cricket Stadium in a bio-secure bubble.

The series, part of the World Test Championship was originally scheduled to be played in March last year.

England will arrive around 3 January and will have to quarantine themselves for 14 days in the UK prior to leaving for Sri Lanka, the report added.



Scotland's players were overcome by emotion after surviving a penalty shootout against Serbia to qualify for the Euros for the first time since 1996. Meanwhile, Goran Pandev made a surprise return to the headlines as the 37-year-old captain scored the all-important goal against Georgia. The win saw North Macedonia qualify for their first major tournament and the celebrations continued long after the final whistle.

PHOTO: UEFA/TWITTER