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Bangladesh's middle-order batsman Naimur Rahman, who made a useful 45, sets off for a single. — AFP photo

## Champs' back against the wall

WORCESTER, England, May 21: Reigning World Cup champions Sri Lanka have nothing more than history to inspire them when they take on buoyant Zimbabwe in their make-or-break match here on Saturday, reports AFP.

Arjuna Ranatunga's beleaguered team must win to stay in contention for the Super Six second round after losing their first two matches.

It's a task made difficult by their wretched form - 16 defeats in the last 20 matches - and Zimbabwe's growing confidence after beating Kenya and India.

A win for Zimbabwe will also see them survive the preliminary round in a World Cup for the first time in their history.

Ranatunga, however, has the memories of 1992 on his side. In that tournament, Zimbabwe appeared to have the match sewn up after amassing 312 for four from 50 overs at New Plymouth in New Zealand.

Ranatunga, however, smashed 88 off 61 balls as the Sri Lankans reached the target with four deliveries to spare.

And in the 1996 World Cup, Zimbabwe travelled to Colombo and were thrashed by six wickets with 13 overs to spare.

Zimbabwe had won just three of their 25 World Cup matches before this tournament but came to England believing they were contenders for the first time after putting together was they believe is their strongest side ever.

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The other teams know we are not a bad side. They will not take us lightly."

The Sri Lankans certainly won't, struggling as they are to come to terms with the damp English weather and poor batting form.

"The batting has not clicked for a long time," Ranatunga said. "I can't pinpoint the reasons, but I know we must turn around quickly if we are to stay in the tournament."

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RAIN, KEEP AWAY: A spectator of the Bangladesh-West Indies match waiting for the rain to stop so that the game can get underway in Dublin yesterday. — AFP photo

## Bookies increasingly edgy

LONDON, May 20: British bookmakers were sweating at the prospect of major losses here on Thursday as bowlers in cricket's World Cup continued to send down an avalanche of wickets, reports AFP.

"We have a 'Top 10' disasters chart in our office and this has shot straight in at number three and could go even higher," says Wally Pyrah of Sporting Index, a leading London spread betting firm.

"We thought we got it right when we said there would be between 240 and 260 wickets in the entire competition. But we have been caught out horribly."

That figure has already been surpassed on Thursday, when Scotland sent down an extraordinary 33 during their 50 overs against Pakistan at Chester-le-Street, the most in a single innings to date.

One over from Gavin Hamilton -- who plays professional cricket for Yorkshire -- took 11 balls to complete and included one no ball and four sides.

When he finally managed to complete it, Hamilton punched the air in mock triumph.

Many commentators have

flood of calls from our clients racing to place money. We have since revised our estimate to between 840 and 880 wickets."

If the revised total proves correct, a punter who placed 10 pounds (16 US dollars) per point when the original estimate was made stands to make more than 6,000 pounds (around 10,000 US dollars).

The explosion in wides continued on Thursday when Scotland sent down an extraordinary 33 during their 50 overs against Pakistan at Chester-le-Street, the most in a single innings to date.

India conceded 51 extras, including 21 wides, on their way to defeat against Zimbabwe on Wednesday. Zimbabwe responded with 24 wides of their own.

Zimbabwe skipper Alastair Campbell said: "If the ball swings more, then you should prepare for that. It's ridiculous to ball so many wides -- and what the ball got to do with all the no balls being sent down?"

No one, however, has yet threatened the 18 balls it took former England pace bowler Gladstone Small to finish one over for county side

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## SL shellshocked

COLOMBO, May 21 (Reuters/Internet): Sri Lanka is in mourning after two defeats at the cricket World Cup.

Not many fans are smiling as the chances of Sri Lanka retaining the title they won in 1996 look remote by the day.

"I don't want to talk about cricket. I don't want to watch the matches anymore," said Sarinda Unamboowe, general manager of a supermarket chain.

"I now call myself a former cricket enthusiast."

The nation is in a despondent mood. The Lanka lion has its tail between its legs, an editorial in the independent Island newspaper said on Friday.

Sri Lanka lost to hosts England by eight wickets in the opening match of the tournament last week.

On Wednesday they were beaten by favourites South Africa by 89 runs as the top Sri Lankan batsmen failed to live up to expectations.

In a country beset with a long-running ethnic conflict, which has claimed tens of thousands of lives, winning cricket

matches provides one of the few escapes to optimism.

"After two humiliating defeats, the cricket-mad nation now feels shy to talk about the game," the Island newspaper said.

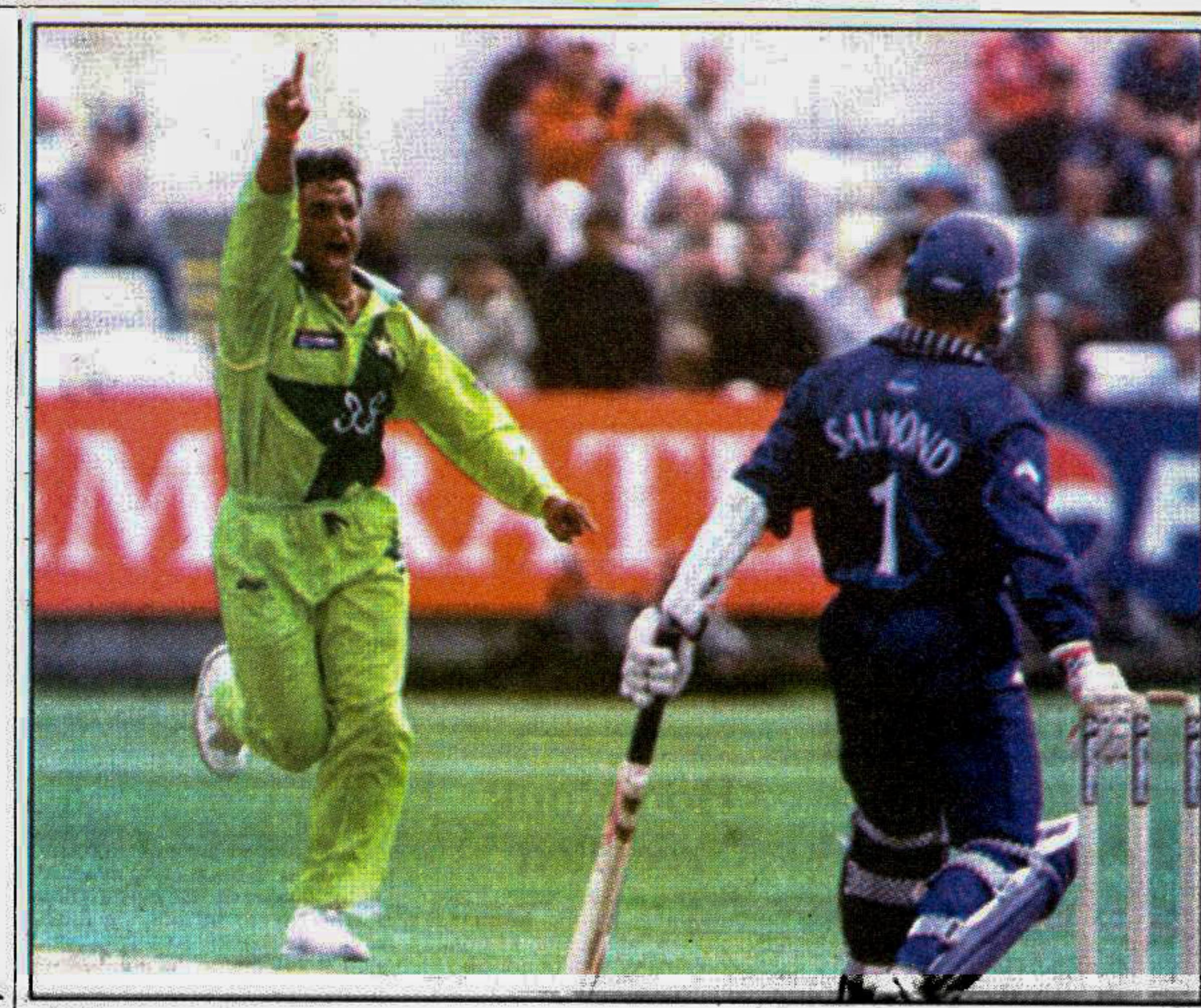
It called for radical reforms in the ruling cricket board, which has been a cauldron of controversy over recent elections where rival contestants accused each other of intimidation.

The state-owned Daily News criticised Sri Lanka's batting and said the "spineless" performance against South Africa left much to be desired.

"Sri Lanka has performed worse than expected. There does not seem to be unity within the side," said Vishu Wickramasooriya, a construction contractor.

Sri Lanka need to win their remaining three matches to make it to the next round of the tournament.

They meet Zimbabwe in their third group match on Saturday before a crucial tie with India on May 26. Sri Lanka will play Kenya on May 30.



Pakistan speedster Shoaib Akhtar exults after getting rid of Scotland captain George Salmon. — AFP photo

## Captain Unwanted

NEW DELHI, May 21: Anger and disappointment at India's woeful start to the cricket World Cup in Britain honed in on a single target Friday -- skipper Mohammad Azharuddin, reported AFP.

The storm of criticism has covered the entire team, but the real venom has been reserved for Azharuddin, 36, whose tactics against Zimbabwe were held up as a major factor behind India's defeat.

"Leading the brigade of culprits was skipper Mohammad Azharuddin," said The Hindu newspaper.

"Azharuddin has always maintained that he does not mind being criticised for playing bad cricket and this was one occasion when he let himself and his team down," said The Times of India.

The Times of India appealed to the Indian captain to set a better example to the rest of his players.

"If Azhar himself appears tense and panics, how can he stop his teammates from developing cold feet?"

Posters saying "Remove Azhar, Save the Country" were pasted up on the walls in Calcutta.

Former Indian Test star Sanjay Manjrekar also suggested that Azharuddin's time had come.

"Azharuddin clearly looks a shadow of himself ... (his) luck seems to be running away from him on this trip," Manjrekar said.

Former Indian left-arm spinner Bishen Singh Bedi was characteristically blunt. "Seriously, I can't imagine how Azhar can look straight into the eyes of his colleagues, leave alone passing the buck," he said.

"India's biggest problem is their captain," former Pakistan captain Imran Khan said in Indian Express.

He described Azharuddin as "... a skipper whose face and body language shows he is incapable of solving his own problems, let alone anybody else's."

While India's loss to

Pakistan captain Wasim Akram had

three wickets in one over. Campbell is quite happy to let the big guns like South Africa and Australia hog the spotlight.

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The Sri Lankans certainly won't, struggling as they are to come to terms with the damp English weather and poor batting form.

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