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Sachin will play for his dad

BRISTOL, England, May 22: Jet-lagged Indian World Cup star Sachin Tendulkar was back in the nets on Saturday just hours after returning to England, saying his deceased father would have wanted him back at the crease, reports AFP.

A composed Tendulkar, who returned earlier than expected after attending his father's funeral, said: "My father would have wanted me to go back."

"My mother told me the same thing - go back and play for India."

"She said my father would have wanted me to do that. I got a lot of support from my family. I must now get used to it that he is no more."

His father Ramesh, a university professor and poet, died of a heart attack on Wednesday.

The 26-year-old Tendulkar, regarded as one of the best batsmen in the world, had initially been expected to return next week, missing two matches rather than one.

But on Wednesday India, without Tendulkar, crashed to a shock three-run defeat against Zimbabwe, seriously threatening India's chances of reaching the second round of the tournament.

Tendulkar, however, will now be available for the crucial group A match against Kenya on Sunday, a game India must win.

Tendulkar added: "My father will be up there somewhere whenever I go to bat, saying 'It's going to be difficult to play but I just have to keep my mind on my father being there watching me all the time and go out and play.'"

"My immediate aim is to see India win their three remaining matches and qualify for the Super Six."

"All the country wants me to play, so I finished all the formalities back home and got the next available plane here. My wife is absolutely behind me too. But it is certainly not going to be easy."

Indian officials, meanwhile, praised the player for his devotion to the cause.

Coach Anshuman Gaekwad said: "It's amazing. We did not expect him back so early."

Indian cricket board president Raj Singh Dungarpur said: "It is not only a gesture of a great cricketer but of a great patriot."

"We are very pleased to see him back. You will see a smile on everyone's faces. He flew in this morning and came straight to the hotel."

"He had a short rest before coming on for practice. He is looking forward to the game, and sure we need a guy like him - any country would. He will definitely make a difference."

Commenting on India's weak start to the tournament, Gaekwad conceded that his team had work to do.

"If you look at it, all our games are tough for us. We will have to really pull ourselves up for all of them. It is not just winning, but winning comfortably."

Chairman of selectors Ajit Wadekar said last night that Tendulkar had called him up and told him he was ready to return.

Gaekwad however reacted angrily to Indian media calls for captain Mohammad Azharuddin to resign, saying they did not help the team's attempts to qualify for the next stage of the World Cup.

India have been accused of being badly prepared for the tournament.

But Gaekwad countered by saying: "We have been holding team meetings twice a day and separate meetings for batsmen and bowlers, having nets regularly and watching videos of the nets. What else can we do?"



CAN HE SAVE INDIA? Sachin Tendulkar arriving at Bombay airport on May 21 prior to his departure for England. — AFP photo

Now or never for India

BRISTOL, England, May 22: India's much-abused captain Mohammad Azharuddin received the best World Cup news possible on Saturday when a grieving Sachin Tendulkar returned early to play against Kenya, reports AFP.

Tendulkar, who returned to India on Wednesday after the death of his father and was badly missed in his side's three-run defeat by Zimbabwe, chose

match after heavy defeats against England and Zimbabwe, but the Indians - especially Azharuddin - are not taking them lightly.

"We can't afford to let our guard down against any team," Azharuddin said.

Coach Anshuman Gaekwad, welcoming Tendulkar's return, said the problem lay in being unable to finish off opponents.

"Technically, the batsmen

and no-balls our bowlers bowled. When it starts happening, I would expect the bowler to start thinking. They did not."

The performance against Zimbabwe was terrible. You lose some, but then the manner in which you lose counts a lot.

The Zimbabweans did not have to earn their wickets, and that is a pity," Gaekwad said.

Azharuddin, meanwhile, received unexpected advice from

negative body language on the field," Imran said.

But Imran, who led Pakistan's 1992 World Cup triumph, added Azharuddin was experienced enough to come back fighting.

SQUADS

INDIA (probable): Saurav Ganguly, Sachin Tendulkar, Rahul Dravid, Mohammad Azharuddin (capt), Ajay Jadeja.



AZHARUDDIN

to fly back two days early in an attempt to rescue the side's floundering Cup campaign.

India, who have also lost to South Africa, must win their three remaining matches against Kenya on Sunday, Sri Lanka on May 26 and England on May 29 to stay in contention for the second round.

Tendulkar, rated as the world's best batsman, was originally scheduled to miss the Kenya game and return for Sri Lanka at Taunton.

Indian cricket board president Raj Singh Dungarpur said: "It is not only a gesture of a great cricketer but of a great patriot."

Without Tendulkar, India can often appear vulnerable.

Last year they lost a one-day game at home to Kenya, a fledgling cricketing nation still to gain Test match status. In the next game, however, Tendulkar exacted his revenge by hitting a match-winning century against them.

Kenya go into Sunday's

HEAD-TO-HEAD

Kenya are still seeking Test status. They gave India a one-day shock last year, however, beating them during a triangular tournament. Sachin Tendulkar then returned for the final and scored an undefeated century to give India their revenge over the Africans.

World Cup:

The sides have played just once, in Cuttack in 1996. Sachin Tendulkar scored 127 not out and Ajay Jadeja a half-century as the Indian won by seven wickets.

Players to watch:

Kenya: Steve Tikolo showed against England why Kenya are regarded as a one-man team. The 27-year-old's 71 against the World Cup hosts was top-class and even suggested an upset as the Africans reached 107 for one.

India: Mohammad Azharuddin. The Indian captain says he is not worried over his side's two opening defeats but the knives are being sharpened for him at home. A big innings from him - he has made 31 runs in his first two outings - would counter the criticism - for a few days at least.

Venue:

Bristol. The home ground of county side Gloucestershire. The bearded Gloucester doctor, W.G. Grace, once played here. For the last 14 years, West Indian Courtney Walsh has been the darling of the local crowd. Capacity 8,500. (AFP)

and the bowlers have performed well," he said. I have no complaints on matters of technique, but it is the repeated failure to finish the job that is worrying.

"I am sorry to say, our players are not applying themselves as they should be."

"I was amazed at the wides



ASIF KARIM

Robin Singh, Nayan Mongia, Javagal Srinath, Nikhil Chopra, Anil Kumble, Venkatesh Prasad.

KENYA (probable): Kennedy Otieno, Ravindu Shah, Steve Tikolo, Maurice Odumbe, Hitesh Modi, Thomas Odoyo, Alpesh Vadher, Asif Karim (capt), Tony Suji, Martin Suji, Mohammad Sheikh. (AFP)

Pakistan practice at last

LEEDS, England, May 21 (Reuters/Internet report): The Pakistan cricket squad finally got down to some serious practice on Friday when they had a concentrated two-hour net at a soggy Headingley.

Captain Wasim Akram complained on Thursday that some of his team were desperately short of form after both warm-up games were washed out and practice conditions at Durham proved less than favourable.

And he must have thought he was in for another frustrating day during the 100-mile drive south to Leeds under black skies, heavy rain and driving wind.

They arrived at Headingley late in the afternoon to find the square covered and the outfield slippery but eventually were able to get down to work, aided by half a dozen bowlers from the Yorkshire county cricket academy.

But it would not be Pakistan if things went too smoothly and they duly had their daily dose of confusion when they entered the changing rooms only to find them laid out with rugby kit.

Nobody had bothered to tell them that Leeds rugby league club, who play on the adjacent pitch and share Headingley's main stand facilities, had a Super League home game against Halifax on Friday night.

Alternative arrangements were hurriedly made for the cricketers.

Pakistan captain Wasim Akram warned his side must improve on their display against Scotland if they are to beat Australia at Headingley tomorrow.

Former Lancashire star

positive against Australia but if we perform in the same way we did against Scotland - and especially the way we fielded - we will not be able to win against Australia.

"I think it will be a good game - it's two of the best teams in the competition competing against each other and I think my boys will rise to the occasion."

Face bowler Shoaib Akhtar, who left the field early in Thursday's victory over Scotland with a sore knee, sat out Friday's session but said he would be fit to play against Australia on Sunday.

Australia travelled up from Cardiff but decided against training at Headingley.

After Thursday's defeat by New Zealand the Australians were in a sombre mood and coach Geoff Marsh said he could not put his finger on what was wrong with the team's disappointing performances in their opening two matches.

"The hunger's definitely there and I wouldn't say they're too tired," said Marsh.

"It's quite puzzling really."

Skipper Steve Waugh knows his side cannot afford any more slip-ups following the shock loss to the Kiwis.

He admitted: "We just haven't played well enough so far. It's just up to us now to lift; everyone has to lift about 10 per cent."

"I don't want to read too much into the New Zealand defeat; it's not at desperation stage just yet. We've got to back ourselves and we've been planning for this for about 18 months."

"It's a pretty basic equation - we've got to win three games. They're all big games but this one's pretty crucial now."

Azzu's day of reckoning

LONDON, May 22: Under-fire Indian skipper Mohammad Azharuddin goes into Sunday's cricket World Cup match against Kenya trying to save not only his team but also his career, reports AFP.

The 36-year-old came to the World Cup hoping to emulate the victorious Indian side of 1983, as well as becoming the first man in history to score 9,000 runs in one-day cricket.

Two matches down the line, he looks like achieving neither.

His team are on the brink of an early flight home after first going down by four wickets to favourites South Africa, then losing a thriller to Zimbabwe by three runs.

Azharuddin, who began the tournament needing just 51 runs to reach 9,000 one-day runs, managed just 31 in those games.

He now finds himself in a no-win situation as the Indians prepare to take on unfancied Kenya at Bristol.

A victory will not stop the criticism, while a defeat will be akin to a national disaster.

One Indian newspaper, the Hindu, said on Friday that he was in charge of a "brigade of culprits".

The Indian Express, meanwhile, called for Azharuddin to quit immediately. "If India are to stay alive in the tournament, Azhar has to go. Now." The captain, it said, was fine for soft-drink advertisements but no longer good enough a player.

Sunday's game should be straightforward. Kenya have

done little of note in the tournament, losing to Zimbabwe by five wickets before going down to hosts England by nine wickets.

But their sensational victory over the West Indies in the last World Cup remains worryingly in the memory.

Azharuddin knows India needs him to come good in the absence of Sachin Tendulkar, who has taken temporary World Cup leave after his father's death in Bombay.

The captain, with a record 317 one-day appearances behind him, remained remarkably cool here on Friday. He told AFP: "It is not an impossible task to win all three matches and make it to the second round. But we are not combining well and that is a worry."

"One day the batting comes good and the bowling fails, or it is the other way round. We are not clicking."

"I think I am in good touch and confident about the way am batting. The runs will come."

Indian fans are wondering whether it is not too late already. Even if India scrape through by defeating Kenya, Sri Lanka and England, they can only take the points scored against other qualified teams into the next phase, making a semi-final place unlikely.

Only a remarkable turnaround will save the team's World Cup ambitions - and stop India electing a new captain within the next few months.

Bangladeshis calm down

DHAKA, May 22 (AFP): Millions of Bangladeshis who were glued to televisions or radios to witness their team battle the West Indies at the World Cup, were thrilled Saturday that they did not lose without a fight.

"Our team played very well as they put up a good fight even if they lost at the end," local sports reporter Zahid Newaz told AFP.

It was a much happier reaction than after the team's dismal performance in its World Cup debut match against New Zealand.

Newcomers Bangladesh made a respectable 182 against West Indies on Friday before losing by seven wickets. They lost to New Zealand by six wickets after collecting only 116 runs.

Their display Friday must have relieved their coach, former West Indian star Gordon Greenidge, who accused them of playing "crazy cricket" in their opener against the Kiwis.

Bangladesh's cricket fans are now pinning their hopes for a win on the match with fellow minnows Scotland.

Opener Mehrib Hossain, the

only Bangladeshi to score an official one-day century and who led the line against the West Indies Friday with a spirited 64, was the talk of the town.

Newspapers ran numerous pictures and stories on him in a shift of sentiment from coverage of the New Zealand match which had castigated Bangladesh's performance.

A Dhaka daily said Hossain's family offered special prayers after his performance, but opted to watch him play from separate locations, in line with a family superstition.

"When we all watched him play together he could not perform ... he hit the first century in an international when we watched separately," his father Mosharrar Hossain, who stayed at work to watch the match, explained.

Bangladeshi Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina, who witnessed the match, telephoned the team at half-time.

She "conveyed her good wishes to the team and encouraged the skipper to up a good fight during the West Indian innings," the official BSS news agency reported.

Indians harshly treated?

BRISTOL, England, May 22: World Cup organisers said on Friday that India had lodged a complaint about the deduction of four overs from their innings during their Group A defeat by Zimbabwe, reports Reuters.

India failed to complete their over in the required time and were penalised by having their innings reduced to 46 overs and eventually lost by three runs.

A world Cup spokeswoman said: "The World Cup technical committee will be meeting Indian team management to discuss the appeal." She declined to give any further details.

Indian team manager and former Test batsman Brijesh Patel said the meeting would take place on Monday but he refused to comment on exactly why India were protesting.

Team sources said that the protest may have nothing to do with India being limited to 46 overs in the match but with the fact that fielding restrictions for Zimbabwe were lifted after 13 overs as part of the penalty rather than the usual 15.

On Wednesday in Leicester, India set down 21 wickets and 16

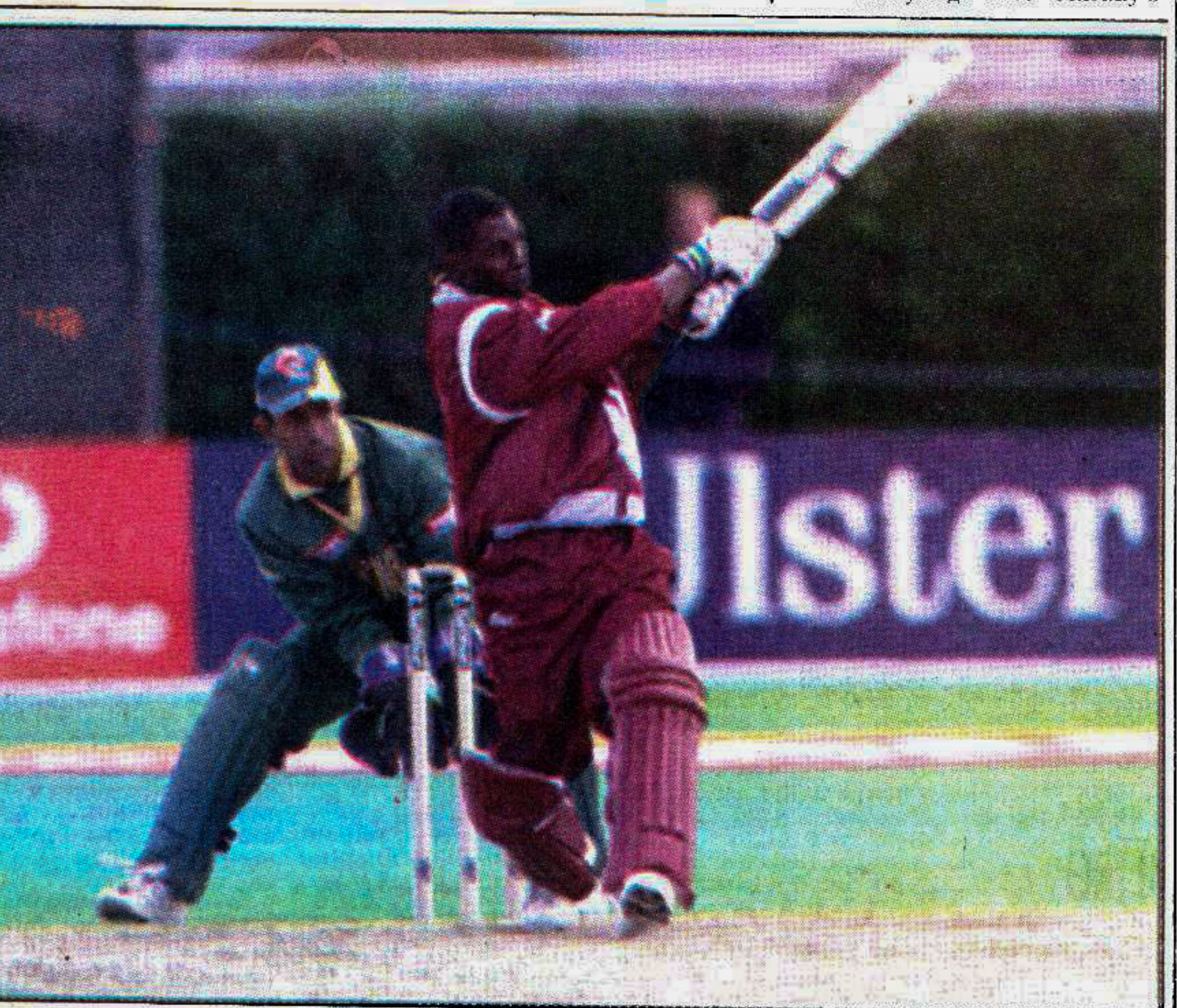
no balls, effectively handing Zimbabwe more than six extra overs. It resulted in them having bowled only 46 overs when the three and a half hours allotted for each innings was up.

Under World Cup rules that meant India then only had 46 overs to beat the Zimbabwean total, which they failed to do by three runs.

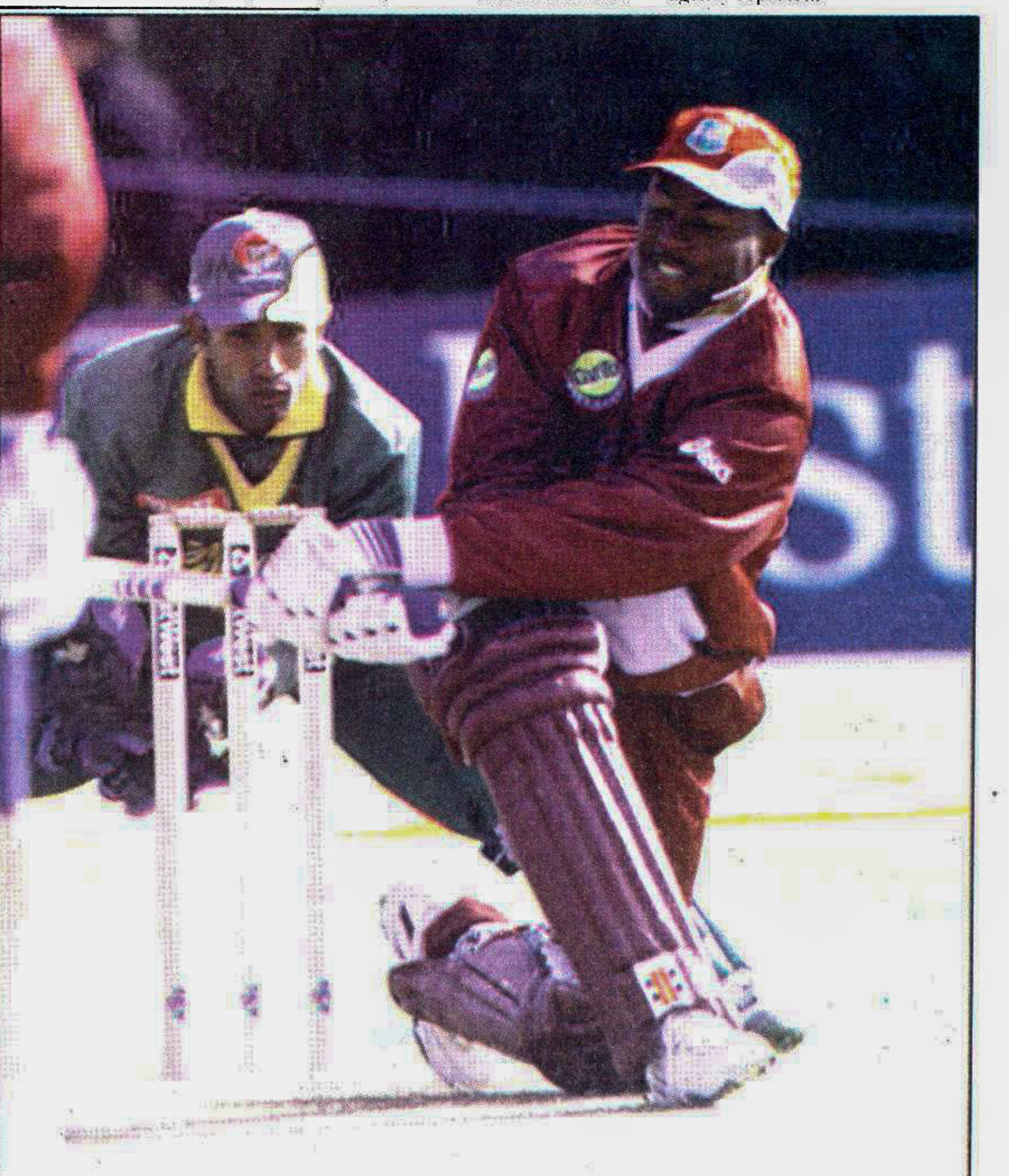
India's first net session before Sunday's game against Kenya was rained off on Friday and the team eventually turned out at the Nevill Road ground in late afternoon drizzle and cold wind for a practice, with players looking miserable.

Their top batsmen Sachin Tendulkar was reported from India to be hoping to return in time for the match after having to fly home last Wednesday for the funeral of his father who died suddenly.

Captain Mohammad Azharuddin, whose effigy has been burned in India following the team's poor performance, had an extended bat in the nets against pace bowlers Javagal Srinath and Venkatesh Prasad to try to discover some batting form.



West Indies opener Sherwin Campbell pulls during the match against Bangladesh at Dublin on May 21. — AFP photo



West Indies superstar Brian Lara sweeping against Bangladesh on May 21. — AFP photo