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Veetee: Coming to a boil

From Nizamuddin Ahmed

LONDON, June 1: Bangladesh Cricket Board may have turned down at least one offer of fifty thousand US dollars before agreeing to the Veetee sponsorship of fifteen thousand pounds.

This was disclosed to this correspondent by BCB member, Selim Abedin Chowdhury.

The assertion was, however, denied by the BCB general secretary Syed Ashraf Hossain in London today.

Talking at his Essex hotel, Selim Abedin Chowdhury said, "While I was tour manager of the Bangladesh team that participated in last year's tri-nation tournament in India, several Indian business and advertisement companies contacted me in search of a sponsorship deal for the Bangladesh World Cup squad."

Kenya was the third team in that tournament, beating whom Bangladesh recorded its first ODI win.

Chowdhury said that team manager Gazi Ashraf Hossain also attended these meetings.

"They (Indian companies) were so persuasive that they rang me even after my return to Bangladesh inquiring about their offers," said Chowdhury.

The best offer was of fifty thousand dollars and I handed over a letter to this effect to the BCB executives in Dhaka.

"The BCB general secretary at one stage informed me that the Indian offer that I had placed had to be rejected because 'it was too low'," Chowdhury continued, expressing his surprise that a deal was made with Veetee for a much lower amount.

In his response, the BCB general secretary, Syed Ashraf Hossain, said Veetee as sponsors of the Bangladesh team in the World Cup was "fixed by the England and Wales Cricket Board (ECB)", the organisers of the tournament.

"There was a cut-out time for sending names of the sponsors to the ECB as the playing clothes had to be ordered. We wrote to several companies and advertisement agencies in Dhaka, but there was no response. So, when the ECB called and said it could arrange Veetee for us, we agreed. We had also asked ECB to look for a sponsor for us. What we got was the only positive response among all the negatives," said Ashraf.

Retorting to the position of Selim Abedin Chowdhury and the Indian offer, Ashraf Hossain said, "that letter was from an advertisement agency, not any company. The agency said it would look for a sponsor for our team, provided we gave it the exclusive right to do so, and on payment of a commission. Later, we contacted them but there was no response. I assume they did not get anyone."

The Veetee issue is now being discussed in England among some in the Bangladesh community.

Said Riazuddin, a London-based Sylhet businessman, at Northampton yesterday, "I am convinced that Bangladesh would have got a better deal. Even with our resources in England, a hundred thousand pound deal was very much possible."



GREAT WORK: Ecstatic teammates rush to congratulate Naimur Rahman after he had run out of Pakistan opener Saeed Anwar. — AFP photo

Concern in unison

LONDON, June 1: Rival captains Mohammad Azharuddin of India and Pakistan's Wasim Akram on Tuesday called for extra protection from fans ahead of their potentially explosive World Cup head-to-head, reports AFP.

"It's not the Pakistan players we fear, but the fans," Azharuddin said ahead of the second round match between the arch-rivals at Old Trafford in Manchester on June 8.

The tension surrounding the match has increased following military clashes and shelling last week on the disputed Kashmir border between the two nations.

British police have already announced extra security plans to prepare for the game in the north-western city of Manchester, which has large Pakistani and Indian communities.

To date, most player complaints have been about over-enthusiastic supporters wanting to congratulate their heroes.

But some players are now voicing fears that rival supporters could assault a player from another team during an end-of-match pitch invasion.

Akram, speaking after a pitch invasion at the end of his side's shock defeat to Bangladesh at Northampton on Monday, said: "Something has to be done to stop this."

"They are coming up to the players and hitting them. It is too much at times. Saqlain (Mushtaq) was quite shaken up."

Hundreds of fans streamed onto the ground even before television replays had confirmed the last dismissal.

The Indian captain, who joined Australia's Steve Waugh earlier in the tournament by warning players could be hurt, said: "It was great to have so many people supporting us against England, but what's the point if we have to run away from them after the match?"

"Even before the last wicket falls, players are thinking how to get back quickly to the pavilion. It may look funny, but it is a very serious matter."

The said pace bowler Venkatesh Prasad had been alarmed after he was surrounded by fans wanting to chair him off.

Azharuddin himself was abused and jostled by a drunken fan after India lost to South Africa at Hove on May 15.

Cricket officials have dismissed suggestions that the match might have to be abandoned, even though extra stewards have failed to stop mass pitch invasions at the World Cup venues, none of which have fencing.

A spokesman for Greater Manchester Police said: "Given the current state of relations between India and Pakistan, we will be looking very closely at increased security for any match between the two sides."

Indian High Commissioner in London Lalit Man Singh played down security fears, saying he was confident the British authorities will handle the matter well.

"There is nothing to worry about, the authorities have addressed themselves to the task at hand. I am looking forward to going up to Manchester and enjoying a good game," he said.

Feast of cricket still to come

LONDON, June 1 (Internet report): England may have failed to qualify for the second stage of the Cricket World Cup for the first time, but the tournament will still prosper.

Tim Lamb, chief executive of the England and Wales Cricket Board, believes it will continue to be a "wonderful" competition, even without the hosts.

Lamb said: "We've got a feast of cricket still to come; there are still some fantastic sides left in the tournament, and there'll be some wonderful matches."

"The Super Sixes and the semi-finals and finals are a complete sell-out, so we must enjoy the remainder of the 'Carnival of Cricket'."

"As chief executive of the ECB it is naturally disappointing when our side is eliminated, but as chief executive of the country who is organising the World Cup, let's not underestimate the enormous amount of cricket still to come."

"This is the most profitable World Cup ever with a global audience of two billion people and a total of 500,000 people will have watched all the matches."

"We've got to bounce back. I don't believe the integrity of the tournament has suffered, but obviously I would have liked England to have got through to the second stage."

"Just because England are not in the later stages shouldn't in any way reduce the interest in the tournament."

"It's going to be covered on television, in the media and there are so many exciting matches to come, with plenty of role models, and plenty of exciting talent on view, which will hopefully inspire youngsters to pick up a bat and a ball."

"And in terms of promoting cricket among the ethnic communities in this country - which the ECB have been managing on greatly - we have seen how much interest there was in this match among the Indian population in Britain."

"It's important that we all remain upbeat and positive that the fact this is the Cricket World Cup, it's not going to come here for another 20 years and we've got to make the best of it."

Banks banks on police

LONDON, June 1: British Sports Minister Tony Banks said Monday police had the expertise to deal with any problems between Indian and Pakistani fans at the cricket World Cup match next week, reports AFP.

Manchester police have begun drafting security plans to prepare for the politically-sensitive meeting between the two countries in the second round at Old Trafford on June 8.

"There is obviously always a potential for difficulties but we are very good at handling security at sporting events in this country, and although there have been a whole series of pitch invasions, they have been ones which have passed off without major incident," Banks said on BBC Radio.

So I think that if it ends up with an India-Pakistan final then the police will take all the necessary steps to prevent any difficulties. But by and large the crowds have been very, very well behaved during the course of the World Cup."



DCNE IN COMPREHENSIVELY: Waqar Younis is clean bowled by left-arm spinner Mohammed Rafique. — AFP photo

Seeking relief in cricket

LAHORE, Pakistan, June 1: In the Pakistani city of Lahore, uncomfortably close to the fighting in Kashmir, events on the cricket field in far-off England are providing a welcome distraction, reports AFP.

Along The Mall and outside the Mughal-built Badshahi Mosque, the talk centres on hopes for a Pakistan-India final at Lords in the World Cup -- as opposed to a military showdown in the disputed Himalayan state.

"People tend to shut their eyes to what's happening not that far from here," said Kim Meng, a stockbroker with NF Dostor.

"It's like the pigeon that's been caught by a cat. The pigeon closes its eyes and hopes for the best, and that's what the people here are doing."

They close their eyes to the prospect of war, focus on the cricket and hope for the best," he said.

Businessman Abdul Rauf, speaking from his office in the Avari Hotel, said the World Cup provided the best distraction for a city on the edge, "too hot and too close to India."

Lahore and its seven million people lie just 35 kilometres (22 miles) from the Indian border. The city has been a strategic front-line player in the three wars fought with India since

partition in 1947. "Obviously people are very worried but they choose not to show it," Meng said.

"I am worried it could spread, and it is like cricket in that they will play to win in war. And as the world knows, this time they have nuclear bombs."

Along the Indian border troops can train their sights on Lahore with an array of conventional howitzers, rocket launchers and heavy artillery guns.

During the last war in 1965, Indian forces bombed Lahore, forcing Pakistan to scramble its air force from the front lines in Kashmir to counter the threat and defend the civilian population.

In the present encounter Indian and Pakistani troops have been exchanging artillery fire since May 9 following the incursion into Indian Kashmir of hundreds of Moslem guerrillas.

Kashmir, twice the catalyst for war between the bitter South Asian rivals, looks again to have the potential to spark a wider conflict with the new found nuclear dimension hovering in the background.

"Being close to the Indian border, and its status as the capital of the Punjab, Lahore is vulnerable to conventional and

non-conventional strikes," said military analyst Karmal Hyder.

In Lahore, arguments over city planning in the event of this type of crisis spreading and engulfing the city have simmered since partition.

Lahore's growth to the south still closer to India has worried military planners, who wanted the city extended northward to ease the evacuation of residents under fire and the deployment of troops.

Bridges across the city's Ravi river would provide an easy target for Indian gunners. Those fleeing the city could be stuck on clogged roads with no way out.

And Lahore's importance in the wider Pakistani economy as the capital of the most populous province, Punjab, would create a financial nightmare.

Dostor's Meng said this was illustrated when the Lahore stock market crumbled after the Pakistani military said it had shot down two Indian MIGs last Thursday, heightening fears of war with India.

He said the military brinkmanship that led to last May's tit-for-tat nuclear tests left India and Pakistan, and the people of Lahore, feeling "insecure."

"It's easier just to watch the cricket."

Lloyd stands by Lara

LONDON, June 1: Skipper Brian Lara should not be blamed for the West Indies' early exit from the cricket World Cup, manager Clive Lloyd has said.

Lloyd, the man who captained the West Indies to the 1975 and 1979 trophies and the 1983 final, conceded the team had a deep-seated batting problem but said Lara should not be made a scapegoat.

"Brian Lara has done extremely well but he can't bat for the whole team. There's nothing wrong with his captaincy. We are not far off from being a decent side," Lloyd said.

Despite Lloyd's backing, Lara, regarded as the best left-hander in the world, was one of the major disappointments of

the tournament. He came to England after scoring 213, 153 not out and 100 in consecutive Tests against Australia but, struggling with an injured wrist, he never found form, making 106 in five innings with a highest score of 36.

Lloyd said the team's strike bowlers, led by veterans Curtly Ambrose and Courtney Walsh, had almost got the team into the second round.

"The bowlers have done extremely well, not just now but for years. But we need batsmen to give the bowlers something to aim at."

"With the right injection of youth, I'm positive we can do well in the future."

Lara, who was sacked, then reinstated last year after a

players' pay revolt, and Lloyd were both under pressure to perform here.

But they are likely to get a guarded vote of confidence after the West Indies' campaign was plagued by bad luck.

Key all-rounder Carl Hooper walked out on the side by retiring without warning just before the Cup began, then coach Malcolm Marshall was hospitalised for cancer surgery.

The West Indies missed out on the Super Six on run rate after finishing equal on points with Australia and New Zealand. One disaster ruined their campaign - their six-wicket defeat to Australia at Old Trafford which saw them dismissed for 110.



ANOTHER NAIL IN PAKISTAN'S COFFIN: Man-of-the-match Khaled Mahmud is elated after getting the wicket of veteran Pakistani batsman Salim Malik on May 31. — AFP photo

Press vexes Pakistan

NORTHAMPTON, June 1: The Pakistani cricket team on Monday accused British newspapers of starting a 'Malicious' campaign against it by accusing speedster Shoaib Akhtar of tampering with the ball and by reigniting the match-fixing controversy, reports AP.

"These are blatant efforts to undermine the sterling performances of the Pakistan team during the current tournament and to undermine them so as to hamper their progress towards the final," team spokesman Nadir Chaudhri said in a written statement distributed to reporters.

"The Pakistan team takes serious affront at this malicious attempt to muddy an otherwise pristine tournament," the statement said.

The team was reacting to reports in The Sunday Times and the News of the World tabloid on Sunday, which quoted an unnamed Australian player and television commentator Tony Greig as saying that Akhtar was indulging in ball-tampering.

The fact is that Shoaib Akhtar, the world's fastest bowler, shall have to be tackled on the wicket and not through baseless allegations in the press," the statement said.

It added that the team has received no official complaint from the organisers and considers these allegations as "an attempt to create an unnecessary controversy."

Allegations against Shoaib have apparently stemmed from his success with reverse swinging the ball during Pakistan's match with Australia last week.

The newspapers cited television clips to claim that Shoaib was seen working on the new ball to obtain a reverse swing.

The News of the World also reported that three unnamed cricketers who were implicated in the judicial probe ordered by the Pakistan government to investigate allegations of match fixing were allowed to play in the World Cup.

It said the report is expected to be suppressed if Pakistan win the World Cup to avoid bad publicity.

The reports are "a malicious and crude attempt to tarnish the image of the current Pakistani players since it asks for action against three unnamed Pakistani players against whom there are only allegations but does not seek the same for the three Australian players who have admitted to accepting money (from bookmakers) for providing match information," the statement said.

The ICC has informed a panel to look into the malice of match-fixing and cricketers' nexus with bookmakers. The first meeting of this panel will be held three days after the World Cup concludes on June 20.