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No hard feelings

HEADINGLEY, England, June 14: South Africa launched an emergency damage-limitation exercise here on Monday to try and rebuild Herschelle Gibbs' confidence after his amazing cricket World Cup blunder, reports AFP.

Gibbs' gaffe - he caught Australian captain Steve Waugh half-way through his match-winning innings of 120, but then let the ball slip to the floor as he prematurely celebrated - not only lost South Africa the game on Sunday.

It also lost them the chance of an easy route to the final. Instead of playing Zimbabwe, they will now have to play Australia again in the semis on Thursday.

But while critics were blaming the 25-year-old from Cape Town - who had himself scored a century earlier in the game - for trying to show off as he took the catch, Hansie Cronje ruled the subject off limits.

He admitted after the last-over defeat that the incident had been "crucial ... Steve Waugh is the man you want to get out in a run chase."

But nobody was looking back at the incident on Monday, with team officials making sure the young player did not brood over the incident.

Instead, they said that Cronje's side were already looking forward to the semi-final rematch with Australia at Edgbaston.

Cronje was stressing the positives, saying: "You can't blame Gibbs. He had an injured finger, but he is valuable to us in the field and he wanted to stay on."

"Steve is a man you want to get out and the catch was crucial. But you can't blame Gibbs, it happens."

"He is still very valuable in the field and has done some great work in the past, these things happen. I'm not blaming anyone."

Former Australian captain Allan Border, however, was in no doubt that Gibbs - regarded as one of the best fielders in the world - had blundered.

"He was showboating a little bit and he's paid the penalty. I don't think he will be doing it again," Border said.

Waugh himself, meanwhile, was in no mood to offer words of comfort to Gibbs. Asked if the incident had been crucial, he said: "Who cares? We won."

Cronje, in a superb piece of captaincy - and perhaps humanity - had realised the gravity of Gibbs' situation in a flash on Sunday.

Gibbs, in his fashionable wrap-around shades, was clearly trying to pose by flicking the ball dismissively over his shoulder after the catch. He had done just the same - successfully - in the previous game against New Zealand.

At the end of the over following his missed catch on Sunday, Gibbs made a move towards his captain but Cronje, with a gesture of the hands, tried to smooth the incident straight out of his young protege's mind, as if it had never happened.

He knew immediately that the young opener batsman, who has scored 91 and 101 in his last two innings, will have a crucial role to play in the rematch.

Kallis will be back

HEADINGLEY, England, June 14: Key all-rounder Jacques Kallis looks certain to return to the South African team for their cricket World Cup semifinal against Australia at Edgbaston on Thursday, reports AFP.

Kallis, struggling with a stomach muscle injury, was not risked on Sunday, but team officials were confident today that he would be fit to return for the rematch against Steve Waugh's side.

Kallis is a key man to the South African effort, opening the bowling and batting at number three.

Against Australia, skipper Hansie Cronje and left-arm spinner Nicky Boje had to share the 10 overs normally bowled by Kallis. They conceded 79 between them without taking a wicket as Australia won by five wickets with two balls to spare.

Cronje said: "When you lose Jacques, you lose two cricketers - a batsman and a bowler. It's very difficult to replace him. At halfway we thought it was defensible total. As soon as the fifth bowler came on, it released all the pressure."



GALLANT GIBBS : South African opener Herschelle Gibbs whacks are towards long on during his superb century on June 13.

Coach cheers charges

LONDON, June 14: Zimbabwean coach David Houghton at last praised his cricket World Cup squad here on Monday - then told them they only had themselves to blame for missing out on the semi-finals, reports AFP.

Houghton, who earlier in the tournament accused his squad of playing "schoolboy cricket" and of "choking" under pressure, said: "We did ourselves proud at times."

"We won't be going home firing our captain or manager or anybody else."

But he said the team had failed to take advantage of their first-round victories over India and South Africa - one of the greatest shocks in World Cup history - during the second phase.

Zimbabwe would have reached the semi-finals if Australia had lost to South Africa in the final game of the second round on Sunday.

Australia's dramatic last-over win, however, meant the African side missed out on run rate to New Zealand.

Houghton said: "It was in our hands and we didn't take it. It was a bit much, asking others to do it for us."

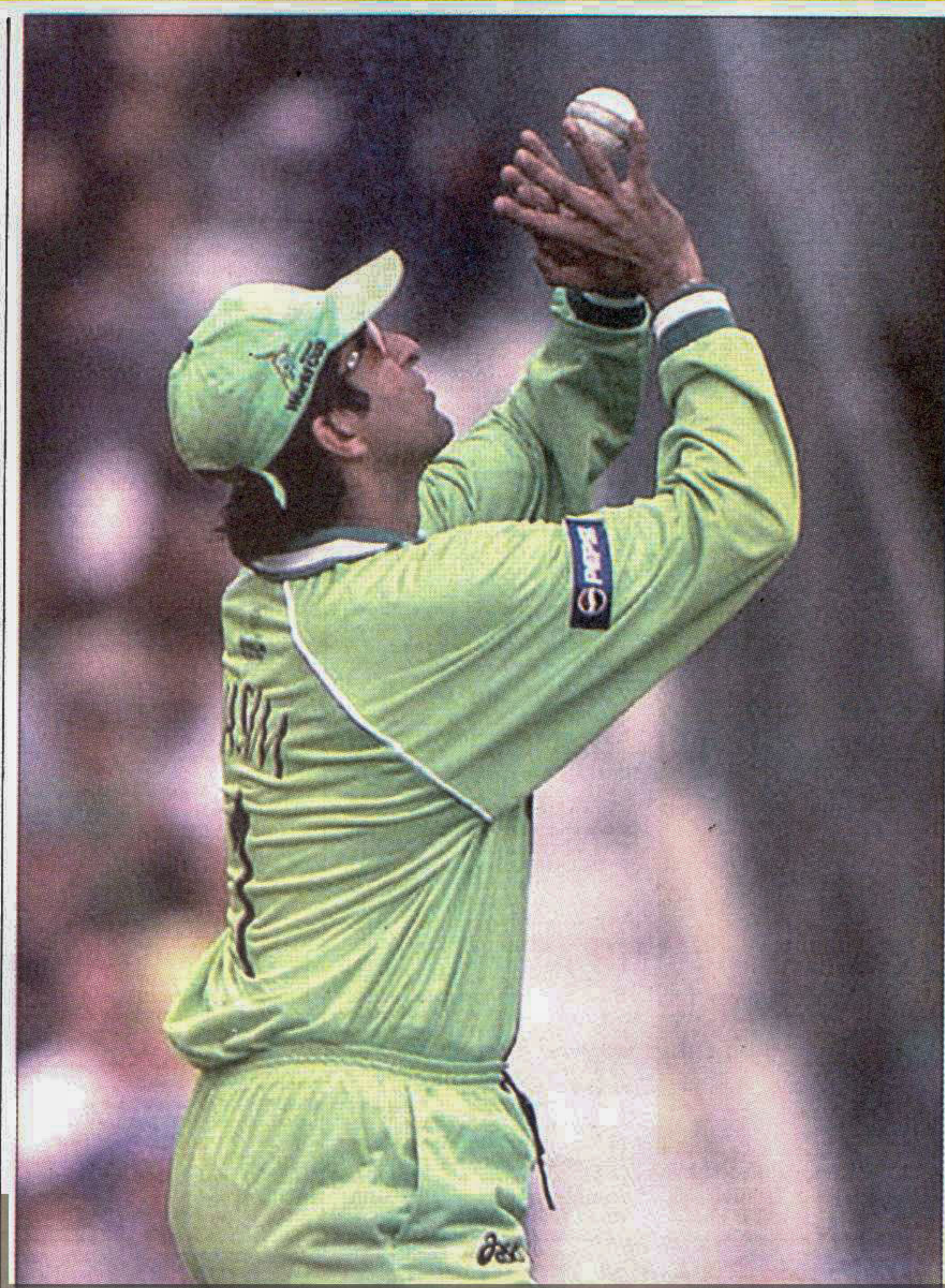
Skipper Alistair Campbell added: "Getting through on run rate isn't the way to do it. We needed to win one more game to get there on merit."

But he echoed Houghton, saying: "The guys can be pretty proud of what they did."

Zimbabwe, a solid team but short on star quality, came to the World Cup with three wins in their previous 25 World Cup games.

But they doubled that tally in the first round here.

In the Super Six phase, however, needing just one more win to reach the last four, they lost heavily to Australia and Pakistan and were facing defeat against New Zealand before the game was washed out by rain.



Wasim Akram has got just two more big catches to grasp. — Star file photo

Away from the pitch

LONDON, June 14 (AFP): What's been happening off the pitch at the cricket World Cup:

May 9: Former Australian captain Allan Border calls on his fellow cricket selectors to stop players signing up with English counties. "We'll try to do everything we can to stop it," Border says, after Shane Warne and Glenn McGrath announce they would like to play in England.

May 10: Australian captain Steve Waugh and fast bowler Glenn McGrath slam proposals to stop sledging. Waugh said the recommendations by the MCC committee, which would see offending sides docked live runs for intimidating or insulting batsmen, were "pretty stupid."

May 11: India's financial centre Bombay braces itself for a sick-leave epidemic during the World Cup. More than 80 million Indians are expected to remain glued to their televisions. "Of course there will be absenteeism," said Vijay Kalantri, of the All India Association of Industries.

West Indian World Cup captain Brian Lara is refused permission to take a break from the tournament to watch the European Cup football final in Barcelona. Lara wants to cheer on his friend Dwight Yorke of Manchester United against Bayern Munich, a day before the West Indies play Scotland.

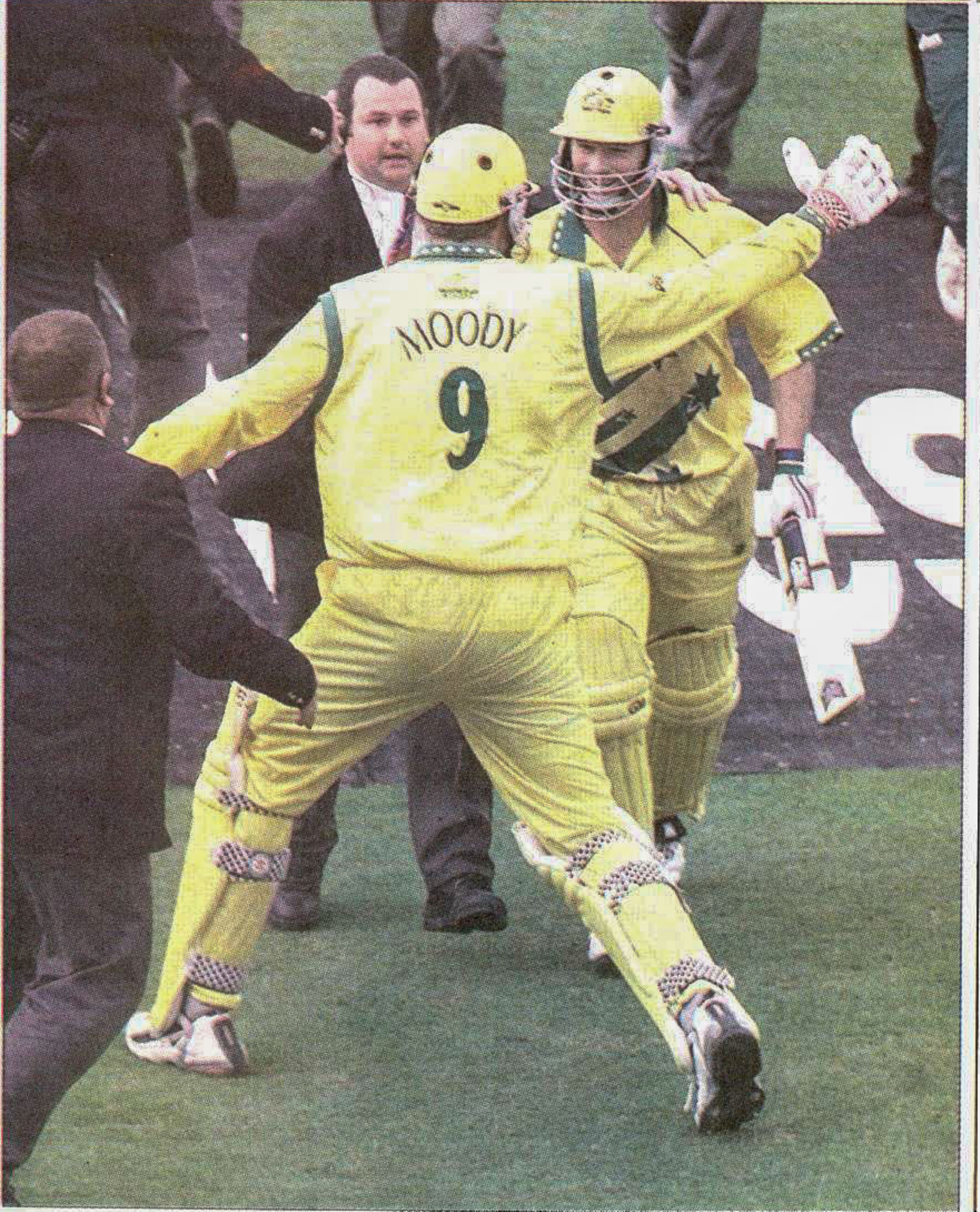
May 12: Bangladeshi power officials praying for rain during the World Cup to reduce pressure on strained electricity supplies and avoid violent protests by irate fans in the event of a blackout. Officials hope wet and cool weather would leave more power for televisions since air conditioners and fans would be switched off.

Australian umpire Darrell Hair receives death threats from an English-based Tamil extremist group. Hair called Sri-Lankan off-spinner Muttiah Muralitharan, the only Tamil in Sri Lanka's squad, for throwing during a Test against Australia in 1995.

Pakistani cricket legend Imran Khan rejects reports that paceman Shoaib Akhtar has a suspect bowling action. "It is ridiculous and generated by those who fear Shoaib. He has a clear and genuine action," he says.

Pakistan appeal to the World Cup organisers for another warm-up game after three practice matches against county opposition are ruined by rain. The request is turned down.

May 13: Cricket fans in southern India mail a 16-kilogramme (35-pound) good luck card to the Indian team. The 30-metre (100-foot) missile contains thousands of messages scrawled in the past 10 days.



SKIPPER YOU ARE GREAT: Tom Moody (No 9), the Australian all-rounder, congratulating captain Steve Waugh after victory was achieved against South Africa. — AFP photo

Super yet suspect

LONDON, June 14 (Reuters/Internet): Zimbabwe's cricketers sat in a London hotel over the weekend with their World Cup fate hanging in the balance.

A place in the semifinals was tantalisingly close but it rested on the outcome of the last two Super Six second-round matches.

As Zimbabwe captain Alistair Campbell remarked before their two-day wait they had "two bites at the cherry", needing either India to beat New Zealand on Saturday or South Africa to beat Australia on Sunday.

In the event, wins for New Zealand and Australia in a compelling Super Six finale ended Zimbabwe's dream of reaching the last four for the first time. Those results also avoided an unlikely semifinalist because of an anomaly in the tournament's new format.

Had Zimbabwe gone through to the semifinals they would have done so without winning a Super Six game. They lost to Australia and Pakistan and had a washed-out encounter with New Zealand from which they took one point.

Even if they had not beaten South Africa on Sunday, the Australians would have had two wins out of three in the Super Six and success at this more demanding stage must ultimately decide if a team progresses to the semifinals.

Moreover, the system under which teams carried forward to the Super Six the points gained against fellow group qualifiers also assumed an inflated importance.

While rewarding sides for consistently winning group games, it meant a team who brought forward the maximum

four points could almost certainly get into the semifinals by winning only once in the Super Six round.

The concept of the Super Sixes was worthy in that it ensured the top three teams from the two first-round groups played each other, and was neatly staged during a 10-day period, but overall performance in this phase needed to be more significant.

The fairest format was at the 1992 tournament in Australia and New Zealand where all the nine teams played each other on a round-robin basis and the top four qualified for the semifinals.

However, with 12 sides now involved that system would produce an unwieldy number of

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JOHNSON STOOD A CLASS APART : Zimbabwe all-rounder Neil Johnson was one of the hottest commodities of the World Cup. — Star file photo

Kiwis no match?

KARACHI, June 14: Pakistani cricket fans Monday expressed happiness at avoiding the tough South Africans and Australians in the semi-finals of the cricket World Cup and termed it a good omen for the national team to face the Kiwis, reports AFP.

Fans cheered Steve Waugh's side and applauded as Australia defeated South Africa in a thrilling match by chasing 271 runs on Sunday.

With South Africa's defeat it has to face Australia again in the semis, while Pakistan will face the Kiwis in the other semifinal before the winners vie in the final of the prestigious tournament on June 20.

"We love you Steve," some fans shouted as others danced when he ran for the winning run taking his side to a last over victory.

"Let them (Australia and South Africa) fight for the berth in the final. We are already in the final as we had defeated New Zealand in the group matches. And don't you think it will be easy," said delighted Nasir Siddiqui.

"God is helping us. It is a good omen and is a signal for us that we might win the world cup again," Siddiqui said, referring to Pakistan's four wicket victory against New Zealand in the 1992 semis.

Imran Khan led the Pakistanis to victory in the world cup in 1992 in Australia after defeating England, the only cup victory for the side during the last six tournaments since 1975. Pakistan qualified five times for the semis but reached the final only once.

"Obviously playing against tough teams and an easy team like New Zealand is different. It is better to go for a duel in the final rather than in the semis," said a fan Muwawhid Hussain.

Pakistan have only lost once to the Kiwis in the World Cup. The two teams did not meet in the first two editions of the cup. Pakistan won the needle game in the 1983 world cup at Nottingham by a narrow 11 run margin. They lost the first match at Birmingham by 52 runs.

But some people were cautious keeping in mind the side's unpredictability and its inconsistent performance. "Let's pray because they can defeat anybody and are also capable of losing to the team like Bangladesh," said teenager, Wassey Farooqui.

Discarded cricketer Basit Ali termed Pakistan's playing against the Kiwis "good fortune."

"It provides Pakistan with a good chance but the team can't afford to relax even for a minute and our inconsistent batsmen have to perform well," he said.

"The Kiwis have good bowlers like Geoff Allott ... and reputed batsmen Roger Twose, Nathan Astle and Chris Cairns. They better watch out," he said.

HIGHS AND LOWS

LONDON, June 14 (AFP): Following are the highest and lowest team totals of the World Cup so far:

HIGHEST TOTALS
373-6 - India v Sri Lanka. May 26, Taunton
329-2 - India v Kenya. May 23, Bristol
303-4 - Australia v Zimbabwe, June 9, Lord's
287-5 - South Africa v New Zealand. June 14.

WORLD CUP AVERAGES

LONDON, June 14 (AFP): Leading batting and bowling averages of the World Cup after the final Super Six match on Sunday.

BATTING									
Player	M	I	NO	R	HS	Avg	100s	50s	
L Klusener (RSA)	8	7	5	250	52no	125.00	0	2	
R Jacobs (WI)	5	4	2	205	80no	102.50	0	2	
R Twose (NZ)	8	8	5	272	80no	90.66	0	3	
S Waugh (AUS)	8	7	3	342	120no	85.50	1	1	
M Abedin (BAN)	4	4	2	140	68no	70.00	0	2	
S Chanderpaul (WI)	5	4	2	134	77	67.00	0	1	
R Dravid (IND)	8	8	1	461	145	65.85	2	3	
N Hussain (ENG)	5	5	1	219	88no	64.66	0	2	
G Hamilton (SCO)	5	5	1	217	76	54.25	0	2	
S Ganguly (IND)	7	7	0	379	183	54.14	1	1	

BOWLING									
Player	O	M	R	W	Avg	Swkt	BB		
C Walsh (WI)	47	8	108	11	9.81	0	4-25		
R King (WI)	31.3	4	95	8	11.87	0	3-30		
C Ambrose (WI)	40	5	94	7	13.42	0	3-31		
G Allott (NZ)	78.4	7	284	20	14.20	0	4-37		
D Gough (ENG)	48.4	4	192	11	17.45	0	4-34		
M Dillon (WI)	36.5	2	140	8	17.50	0	4-46		
A Mullally (ENG)	50	6	176	0	17.60	0	4-37		
L Klusener (RSA)	66.5	4	300	17	17.64	1	5-21		
Waqar Younis (PAK)	9	1	36	2	18.00	0	2-36		
M Ealham (ENG)	50	5	191	10	19.10	0	2-28		

SUPER SIX STANDINGS
LONDON, June 14 (AFP): Cricket World Cup Super Six table after Sunday's final second-round match:

Team	P	W	L	T	NR	Pts	NRR
*Pakistan	5	3	2	0	0	6	+0.65
*Australia	5	3	2	0	0	6	+0.36
*South Africa	5	3	2	0	0	6	-0.17
*New Zealand	5	2	2	0	1	5	-0.52
Zimbabwe	5	2	2	0	1	5	-0.79
India	5	1	4	0	0	2	-0.15

Table includes team points and results retained from first round (*denotes semifinalists).