

Contracts set for review

REUTERS, Karachi

In the wake of the doping bans imposed on fast bowlers Shoaib Akhtar and Mohammad Asif, the Pakistan Cricket Board will conduct a review of central contracts awarded to players, an official said on Friday.

"The central contracts of Shoaib and Asif are automatically cancelled after they were banned," said Saleem Altaf, director cricket operations.

"But we are also going to review the remaining contracts now," he said, adding that the PCB would revise the contracts in line with its zero tolerance policy on doping.

The PCB awarded one-year contracts to 19 players before a tour of England in June, but the revised contracts would be given for the period January to June 2007.

Players in the top bracket receive a monthly salary of rupees 250,000 (\$4,150) in addition to their base match fees and other incentives.

The drugs tribunal that conducted the inquiry into Akhtar and Asif found both had violated their contractual clauses.

He also indicated the new contracts would be awarded only to players who have played a minimum number of matches and would include incentive-based match fees.

"We are trying to curtail players' power in a methodical manner and we will try to adopt policies of other boards while awarding fresh contracts with added responsibility on players."

Smith dazed by defeat

BBC ONLINE, undated

South Africa captain Graeme Smith was philosophical in defeat after Chris Gayle's century ended their Champions Trophy hopes in the semifinals.

"We thought we had a reasonable score to defend," Smith said. "But they batted superbly and Gayle's knock was unbelievable. It was a magnificent 100.

"He really transferred the pressure onto us in the first 10-15 overs.

"Maybe we didn't bowl as well as we could but sometimes you just have to give credit where it is due."

Despite failing to reach the final, Smith insisted the Proteas could be satisfied with their efforts in the tournament as they return home to prepare for five one-dayers and three Tests against India starting later this month.

"It has been a good tournament for us overall and we will learn some lessons from this match," he added.

"It will be nice to get back home and play in front of our home fans. India are always an exciting side to play against and hopefully we can perform well."

England denial stuns Healy

REUTERS, Sydney

Former Australian Test wicketkeeper Ian Healy cannot understand how England's performances have deteriorated so rapidly since their Ashes win in 2005.

Healy said he had expected, and hoped, England would continue their winning ways after their enthralling series win over Australia to set the stage for an epic rematch this summer.

But England's performances over the past 15 months have been anything but flattering and they have been given little hope of retaining the Ashes in Australia without their injured captain Michael Vaughan.

England have won just five of their last 13 tests, including one by forfeit, and will arrive in Australia earlier than planned after being knocked out of the Champions Trophy in India in the pool stage.

"It's definitely not natural and I don't know whether it's been explained in England, but I can't work out why it has happened," Healy told Australian Associated Press.

Healy, who still holds the world record for the most test dismissals by a wicketkeeper with 395 from 119 tests, said he was disappointed by England's lacklustre displays.

He added that England had an obligation to play better after beating Australia.

"You beat the world champs, for the good of the game you need to keep beating everyone else as well," he said.

"Sure have a headbutt and a battle and maybe lose to the world champs the next time, but with other opposition, you should be starting to dominate a little better than they have in the last 12 months."

The England squad are due to arrive in Australia on Sunday morning with the first of five tests starting at Brisbane on Nov 23.



Zimbabwe cricketer Mark Vermeulen (L) arrives at the Harare magistrates court escorted by police on Friday.

The eccentric Mr Vermeulen



CRICINFO, undated

It has emerged that Mark Vermeulen, the former Zimbabwe batsman who has been charged with arson, has been behaving increasingly erratically in recent months, even by his already eccentric standards.

Vermeulen is being held by the police in Harare after reportedly confessing to starting fires at the Zimbabwe board (ZC) headquarters and the Zimbabwe Cricket Academy. The blaze at the Academy destroyed buildings and equipment, but the one in the ZC boardroom was quickly put out.

He is due to appear in court in the next few days, and if found guilty he

faces a minimum of two years in prison. One local told me that "going to prison here for three months is hell... prison is a death sentence for a white person... they will gladly put him inside and throw away the key."

But there are serious questions emerging about Vermeulen's mental state and friends and colleagues speak of him being acutely depressed.

In September he was banned for ten years after a much-publicised incident in a Lancashire League match. Although that ban was reduced on appeal, his behaviour both on and off the field was extraordinary. His lawyer claimed that his client was "suffering from a depressive illness which of course has a significant impact upon his behaviour". He returned to Zimbabwe where his mental state

seemed to slide even further.

Earlier last month he was arrested after arriving at the gates of Robert Mugabe's fortified official residence in Harare demanding to speak to the president, who is the patron of Zimbabwe Cricket. It is common knowledge that people have been shot for just being in vicinity of the palace at the wrong time, underlining just how ill-advised Vermeulen's conduct was. He had also been undergoing treatment after a car crash.

On Monday, he was reportedly escorted from the South African embassy where he was trying to obtain a visa to travel to Johannesburg. The fires followed that and the following night.

Pigeon sledge continues

AFP, Sydney

Senior Australian pace spearhead Glenn McGrath has taunted England's batsmen to attack him if they dare in this month's Ashes cricket series.

The 36-year-old paceman is working his way back to full fitness and bowling rhythm after taking eight months off to support his ill wife.

He looked close to his best with 3-22 against New Zealand on Wednesday to help ensure Australia's passage to the Champions Trophy final against the West Indies in India.

McGrath and Australian skipper Ricky Ponting have encouraged England, who arrive here Sunday for the Ashes campaign, to attack the paceman all they liked in the five-Test series.

"Let them go for it, that's all I'm going to say," Ponting told Australian reporters in India.

McGrath added: "I'll be happy if they came out like that.

"I think (injured England captain Michael Vaughan) targeted me last time (2005 Ashes series), and I knocked him over four or five times.

"So I'm happy with that."

Australia's leading one-day wicket-taker said there was more improvement to be made en route to the Ashes.

"Each game I've played, I've put a little piece of the puzzle back together," he said.

"It's feeling pretty good at the moment, I was happy today (Thursday). There were a few little errors I can still improve but it's looking pretty good.

"There's a few more games until the Ashes and I shouldn't be too far off 100 percent."

Alonso bids Renault bye

BBC ONLINE, undated

Formula One champion Fernando Alonso has said his final goodbye to Renault personnel ahead of joining McLaren.

The Spaniard paid a farewell visit to Renault's Viry-Chatillon factory near Paris where the team's F1 engines are constructed.

"Thanks to you, I have had an amazing engine," he told staff whose efforts helped Renault to the constructors' title ahead of Ferrari.

"The V10 last year and the V8 this year were fantastic."

Alonso, 25, secured his second consecutive drivers' championship in Brazil this month.

Last week he visited the team's Enstone factory in Oxfordshire on a similar farewell visit.

"I am now moving on to another team as you know," he told staff there.

"But if I don't have the possibility to win in the future, then I hope you win because you are the best."

Lara relishes

FROM PAGE 17 victory against South Africa to left-handed openers Gayle and Shivnarine Chanderpaul (57), who retired hurt due to cramps but not before adding 154 for the first wicket.

"The way Gayle and Chanderpaul started, they transferred the pressure on South Africa. It was a good effort and everybody must be commended," said Lara.

"They came out ready to put pressure on Shaun Pollock, Makhaya Ntini and Andre Nel. The fact that in 15 overs or so, we were almost close to 100 put them on the backfoot. They just had to play catch-up cricket after that."

The West Indies were never under pressure after the Gayle-Chanderpaul stand even after losing four wickets, including that of Lara, in the space of 48 runs.

"We always thought the target of 259 was gettable and the guys talked about it," he said.

"They thought the pitch looked very good and it would stay that way for the entire 100 overs. So, it was a good toss to lose. It's a situation from where we just have to move on."

Laxman dreams

FROM PAGE 17 into the team for the next tour and hopefully to the World Cup squad," said Laxman, who has never played in the game's flagship event.

He expressed hope that he would have enough opportunity to prove his worth in the Caribbean Test series which could have a positive impact for the 2007 World Cup.

Laxman sees a lot of opportunity coming his way in the days to come. "I'm presently concentrating on the game and will play my way into the squad. I am focussed on my game." The right-handed batsman was ignored for the ODI team for the five-match series in South Africa starting later this month despite the injury to Yuvraj Singh and the expansion of the squad to 16 members.

Dilip Vengsarkar, former India captain and the new chairman of national selectors, had said while announcing the squad that Laxman was neither fully fit nor had the necessary fitness to play one-day cricket.

I'll fight it out: Asif



AFP, Lahore

Pakistan's young fast bowler Mohammad Asif said Friday he would fight a one-year ban for doping and pledged to emerge stronger from the scandal.

"I am appealing against the ban. I will appeal this ban and fight it out," Asif told AFP in his first public comments since he was ruled out of all international and domestic cricket on Wednesday.

Asif's new-ball partner Shoaib Akhtar was banned for two years after both tested positive for the prohibited, performance-enhancing steroid nandrolone last month.

The pair will miss the 2007 World Cup in the West Indies.

Lanky 23-year-old Asif received a lighter sentence because a Pakistan Cricket Board tribunal said that, unlike Akhtar, he had never been tested before and knew little about doping matters.

"I had never thought of facing such a situation in my career," said Asif.

"It's so unimaginable that I won't

be playing the World Cup. I want to play the event to help Pakistan win it," said Asif, who hails from the small farming village of Machikay near Sheikupura in central Punjab province.

He rose to fame only last year with a ten-wicket haul against Ashes-winners England in a side match in Lahore -- a display that earned him a contract with English county Leicestershire.

Asif then took seven wickets to help Pakistan win the Karachi Test and the series against arch rivals India in January this year, followed by 17 wickets in Pakistan's 2-0 win in Sri Lanka.

He missed Pakistan's first three Tests against England but returned at the forfeited Oval Test in August with a four-wicket haul and performed well in the one-day series.

The failed dope test, after which he and Akhtar were pulled out of Pakistan's Champions Trophy squad in India, capped a year during which he started as new hope but ended as fallen idol.

Asif said he felt traumatised.

"I can't tell you what I am going through. Sometimes you go through a crisis, like you don't get wickets or

you are out of favour with selectors - but this is something I never thought of," he said.

"My whole family, father, mother and brothers and a lot of friends are very worried. My teammates, captain Inzamamul Haq and coach Bob Woolmer are disappointed but everyone has tried to lift me up from this."

Asif pledged that he had not taken any banned substances on purpose.

Team physiotherapist Darryn Lifson told the tribunal that Asif had stopped using a locally-bought vitamin supplement that may have led to his positive tests "as soon as he was told to do so", adding that Asif also had little understanding of English.

"I have earned a name only on my God-gifted abilities and not on anything else and knew nothing about doping," he added.

While Asif's youth will likely allow him to make a comeback, the career of 31-year-old Akhtar, nicknamed the "Rawalpindi Express", could have hit the buffers as he will be 33 by the time he returns.

Robredo books qtr place



AFP, Paris

Argentina's David Nalbandian and Tommy Robredo of Spain became the latest players to book their places in the Shanghai Masters Cup on Thursday as America's James Blake was left sweating on his chances.

Nalbandian, the defending Masters Cup champion, made sure of his inclusion in the eight-man field without hitting a ball when Germany's Tommy Haas beat Blake 6-4, 6-2 here in the Paris Masters third round.

Robredo also reserved his seat on the plane to China with a 6-4, 7-6 (7/1) win over France's Paul-Henri Mathieu.

Nalbandian, absent from the Paris tournament because of a

stomach injury, and Robredo, join Roger Federer, Rafael Nadal, Ivan Ljubicic, Andy Roddick and Nikolay Davydenko as the confirmed starters in China on November 12.

"It's a dream for me to be in the Masters Cup," said the 24-year-old Robredo, the world number seven.

"At the beginning of the year it was my goal. After winning the Hamburg Masters I was nearly sure I would finish the year in the top ten. Then I had another goal: 'Why not try and make the top eight and qualify for the Masters Cup'.

"This is the best year of my life."

Blake now sits in the eighth and final qualifying place but he can be overtaken by Mario Ancic if the Croatian ninth seed wins his quarterfinal on Friday.

Haas, the 10th seeded German, could also still make the China showpiece but he needs to win the Paris title and hope Ancic falls before the final.

Ancic, who picked up his second



PHOTO: AFP

Spaniard Tommy Robredo plays a backhand against Frenchman Paul-Henri Mathieu during their third round match at the Paris Masters Series on Thursday.

Bhaji blames top-order



PTI, Jalandhar

Ace spinner Harbhajan Singh on Friday blamed the top-order batsmen for India's Champions Trophy debacle and said losing early wickets put the entire team under enormous pressure.

Harbhajan said the failure to get off to a good start took a heavy toll on the other batsmen who also failed to play to potential.

"Our batting order was not in form as there was not much of a

partnership for the first wicket due to which the other batsmen also could not perform to their potential," Harbhajan told PTI in an exclusive interview.

Stressing that there was lot of room for improvement in batting, the 'Turbanator' said the team needed to ensure big partnerships at the top of the order.

"After Sahwag got out early in most matches, our batting was never consistent and for getting a high score, we must have a solid foundation," Harbhajan said, adding as long as the Delhi batsman remained at the crease, a total in the range of 280 to 300 could be expected.

Even though the batsmen did not pull their weight in the side, the off-spinner said the bowlers made it tough for the opposition to score, referring to the game against the West Indies at Ahmedabad.

Even in the defeat against Australia, which sealed India's fate in the tournament, the team fell short by 30 runs, he said, claiming, the additional runs could have allowed the bowlers to change the course of the match in India's favour.

But Harbhajan said the whole team should take the blame.

"The reason for the debacle was that we did not play well and opponents had an edge over us," he said.

Murray's year ends early



AFP, Paris

Andy Murray started 2006 as heir apparent to Tim Henman and enjoyed his crowning glory with a first title in San Jose followed by becoming only the second man this year to beat Roger Federer.

But his breakthrough season ended in a whimper on Thursday with a Paris Masters third round defeat at the hands of Dominik Hrbaty which left the 19-year-old Scotsman admitting he couldn't wait to take a vacation.

"It's been a really tough year mentally for me," said Murray after his tame 7-6 (8/6), 6-0 defeat to the experienced Slovakian.

"It's been a successful year and I think I've earned a break. I've played a lot of tennis and I've done a lot of travelling. I've flown around the world to fit the Davis Cup into my schedule and that makes it a little bit tougher too."

Murray, now ranked 19, started 2006 at 64 in the world and hasn't looked back.

He clinched his first ATP tour title in San Jose beating former world number ones Andy Roddick and Lleyton Hewitt in the semifinal and final respectively.

He also found himself on the gossip pages of his home country tabloids when he celebrated his California win with a very public clinch with girlfriend Kim Sears.

Along the way there have been fail-outs with the demanding British press whom he accused of putting him under unrealistic pressure as the tireless hunt for a potential Grand Slam winner honed in on another suspect.

But a sign that the boy from Dunblane had arrived came in August when he achieved tennis's version of mission impossible - beating world number one Federer.

It came in the second round of the Masters in Cincinnati with a straight sets triumph which had

followed a first round dismissal of Henman.

"There always comes a time when it's kind of meant to be," said Murray who along with Rafael Nadal is the only man to have got the better of the Swiss world number this year. I just felt it was my time to win against him."

Since then, Murray has also found time to prevent Britain from sinking into the twilight world of the Davis Cup Euro/Africa Group Two by winning twice in Ukraine.

"I've played a lot since the start of the year. I tried to pace myself a bit better towards the end. I feel like its time for a break, recharge the batteries and get ready for the next year."

His planning for 2007 will be taken after consultation with coach Brad Gilbert, the man behind part of the success stories of Roddick and Andre Agassi.

"I'll see what Brad wants to do...but I wouldn't mind taking a holiday somewhere, get in the sun, have some time to myself."