

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.



PHOTO:AFP

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

The eccentric Mr Vermeulen

Cricket

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.

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

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-Châtillon 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.

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Lara relishes

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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

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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

Cricket

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.

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."

"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 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 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 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 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.

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"In St Petersburg, I knew from the first round that I had to keep winning matches," said Ancic.

"I'm really delighted with the way I've been playing."

Haas faces former triple champion Marat Safin who was assured of a quarterfinal spot when French 16th seed Richard Gasquet withdrew from their scheduled third round match-up because of a right thigh injury.

Defending champion Tomas Berdych and Davydenko made quick work of their third round opponents.

Berdych, the eighth-seeded Czech, cruised past America's Robby Ginepri 6-3, 6-3 while Davydenko enjoyed a 6-2, 6-2 win over compatriot Dmitry Tursunov.

Berdych, the surprise 2005 champion, now has an 8-0 record at the tournament and next faces Dominik Hrbaty of Slovakia who beat a disappointing Andy Murray of Britain 7-6 (8/6), 6-0.

Davydenko's impressive win should also have guaranteed him a place in the Davis Cup final.

He had been edged out of the singles line-up by the America-based Tursunov in the semifinal in Moscow in December.

The 25-year-old Russian, who is chasing his fifth title of 2006, has dropped just four games in two matches this week, spending less than two hours on court.

Russian lucky loser Teimuraz Gabashvili, who replaced the absent Federer in the main draw, wasted a match point and went down to 4-6, 7-6 (8/6), 6-2 defeat at the hands of Finnish 14th seed Jarkko Nieminen.

The Finn will face Robredo in the quarterfinals.

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

PHOTO: AFP



Murray's year ends early

Tennis

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 19-year-old Hrbaty which left the 19-year-old Scotsman admitting he couldn't wait to take a vacation.