

Shoaib happy at return

PTI, Karachi

Controversial fast bowler Shoaib Akhtar, a late inclusion in the Pakistani squad for the tour of South Africa, believes the dope saga is behind him despite the matter lying before the Court of Arbitration for Sports.

"I have been cleared by a competent committee and do not believe I'm under any kind of threat. I don't even think about it anymore," he said referring to the dope scandal that had put his career jeorpardy before he was exonerated of the charge.

The overturning of his ban has been challenged by the World Anti Doping Agency in Court of Arbitration for Sports in Lausanne, Switzerland.

Drafted in as a late replacement for an injured Umar Gul, Shoaib would miss out on the first Test, but the 'Rawalpindi Express' was confident of coming good in the rest of the matches.

"It is great to be back and even though I was looking forward to the opening Test, I'm not really disappointed at missing it because there would be two more matches to go in the series against South Africa. I'm fit and raring to go," he was quoted as saying in 'The News' on Wednesday.

Shoaib also said captain Inzamamul Haq, who is believed to be instrumental in the bowler being ignored from the initial 17-member squad, should be more supportive of his teammates.

"I believe as captain Inzamam should be more supportive of his teammates, especially if they are going through a rough time. As a captain, it is Inzamam's responsibility to keep players united."

Hunt for pacers

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"We have to produce some good fast bowlers to compete at the highest level and I think physique is not a barrier to become a good pacesman. Good training, which has already seen success in India and especially in Sri Lanka, is more important," explained the bearded organiser.

"The BCB's pace academy will be working full-fledged so it's a continues process to train the bowlers who had been picked up from the talent hunt programme. We will definitely focus on speed and believe that somebody's action could be rectified if he had real speed, over 140kph," he explained adding that they were also concerned about friendly pitches for grooming fast bowlers.

BCB development committee chairman Khondokar Jamiluddin informed that they have a plan to bring great fast bowlers like Wasim Akram and Waqar Younis during the camp, which will be conducted with selected players after the countrywide search.

"We had a very resounding success last time and we are looking forward for another milestone achievement. One thing I must say is that the GrameenPhone Pacer Hunt is exceptional because it is a national platform that gives every young aspirant to prove his mettle," said Erik Aas, managing director of GrameenPhone.

The Tk 15-lakh programme will be held at twelve different venues -- Phase 1: Chittagong (February 7-9), Barisal (Feb 13-14), Madaripur (Feb 15-16), Khulna (Feb 17-18), Satkhira (Feb 19-20), Rangpur (Feb 25-26), Dinajpur (Feb 27-28), Rajshahi (March 1-2), Mymensingh (Mar 3-4), Moulavibazar (Mar 7-8), Narayanganj (Mar 10-11) and Dhaka (Mar 20); Phase 2: April 20-29 and Phase 3: June 16-25.

1.2 million

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for hefty compensation.

Their chairman Sten-Inge Fredin said: "The exact sum a deal like this will cost United depends on a lot of circumstances. For example, we would have to decide if we need to replace him in our own team.

"It is, first and foremost, up to Henrik if he will stay in Manchester. If he wants that, then we are certainly up for discussions with United."

Diarra staying

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less," said agent Frederic Guerra to news agency GRT.

"I am in daily contact with the Real Madrid management and the option of selling Diarra has never been mentioned," he continued. The agent was also eager to dismiss rumours that there are any problems with Coach Fabio Capello, who has allegedly included the player's name in the list of men that he would want to be sold at the end of the season.

"He is not playing now, but this doesn't mean anything. Mahamadou has no problem at all with the tactician," ended Guerra.

Inter chief Massimo Moratti, questioned on the possible arrival of Diarra, cooled talk of such a move on Tuesday.

"I don't know anything about him, you'll have to ask boss Roberto Mancini," stated the Nerazzurri owner.



PHOTO: INTERNET

Indian tennis star Sania Mirza celebrates after beating Australia's Alicia Molik in the Hobart International tournament on Wednesday.

Sania sails, Serena fails



AFP, Hobart

Seven-time Grand Slam champion Serena Williams was eliminated from the quarterfinals of the Hobart International in three sets here Wednesday.

The American, ranked 94 after an injury-blighted last season, went down to Austrian Sybille Bammer, 3-6, 7-5, 6-3, leaving her short of match conditioning ahead of next week's Australian Open in Melbourne.

"I've never seen her play like this before in my life. I guess she was just up to play me," Williams said of the world number 56.

"I don't think I played that well, I made a lot of unforced errors, but I just think I'm a little rusty so I've just got to try and shake it off for Melbourne (the Australian Open).

"I just got a little bit sore (in the third set), but I wasn't really tired. My body was just feeling sore."

Bammer, who ousted second seed Anabel Medina Garrigues in the second round, will now play Russia's 70th-ranked Vasilisa Bardina in Thursday's semi-finals.

India's Sania Mirza will take on the tournament top seed Anna Chakvetadze in the other semi-final.

Mirza defeated her close friend and doubles partner Alicia Molik of Australia, 6-4, 6-1 in their last-eight match on Wednesday to reach her

first semi-final in an Australian WTA Tour event.

"I'm excited, it's my first week of the year in a WTA tournament and I made the semis," said Mirza, whose lone singles title came in Hyderabad in 2005.

"It's really good before the Open to be playing well and playing in conditions that aren't very easy."

Mirza is having a great tournament having eliminated fourth seed Maria Kirilenko in the first round.

Chakvetadze defeated seventh-seed Jie Zheng of China, 4-6, 6-1, 6-1.

Compatriot Vasilisa Bardina triumphed 3-6, 6-2, 7-5 in a grueling three-hour match against Catalina Castano of Colombia.

Blake on course



AFP, Sydney

World number four James Blake's chances of back-to-back Sydney International tennis titles improved with a second round victory and more withdrawals here Wednesday.

The top half of the draw is opening up for the American third seed after his straight sets win over Australian Nathan Healey left him with a quarterfinal Thursday against Russian lucky loser Evgeny Korolev.

Top seed Rafael Nadal withdrew from the tournament on Tuesday with a right-thigh injury, giving defending champion Blake a great chance of progressing further.

The bottom half of the men's draw also lost second seed Nikolay Davydenko, who retired after losing the first set to Frenchman Paul-Henri Mathieu, citing a possible stress fracture in his right foot.

Blake enjoyed his career-best season last year with five ATP titles to finish fourth in the year-end rankings.

"Luckily, in the last year it has been a pretty fun ride. I've been rolling along and I seem to keep

going further and further," Blake said.

"I hope to continue that, but I know there's going to be times where there's valleys to go with these peaks."

Blake said he felt he was a definitely a better player than when he won here 12 months ago.

"That's exciting to me. That's one of the main reasons I play the game is to keep getting better."

"I definitely feel like right now my backhand is a lot better, physically I'm better, and I think just mentally I'm a little stronger and just being able to get through any of the ups and downs of the year so I'm more confident in that regard."

Korolev capitalised on his late replacement of compatriot Dmitry Turunov, who withdrew with a wrist injury, by beating American Robby Ginepri, 0-6, 6-4, 6-4.

Marcos Baghdatis will play former world number one Carlos Moya in the quarter-finals after battling past Czech Jan Hernych, 6-4, 6-7, 6-3.

The Greek Cypriot crowd-pleaser, ranked 12, took 133 minutes to bring off the win in soaring temperatures with the weather forecast to get even hotter over the next two days.

"I'm feeling better and better. It was not easy. It was hot, the first time I'm playing in this heat since a long time," Baghdatis said.

"It's good to have a tough match out there in the heat. I think it's going to make me get ready for the Australian Open and for the next few matches out here."

Moya, twice a losing finalist here, fought off a match point before he prevailed over fellow Spaniard and eighth seed Fernando Verdasco, 4-6, 7-6, 6-3.

Baghdatis, who shocked the tennis world by reaching the final of last year's Australian Open, where he lost in four sets to Roger Federer, said he was ready to handle the pressures of extra expectations.

"There is pressure, just trying to live with it," he said.

"That's the way it is. Just try to accept it, just try to enjoy it and just try to play."

"Every time I go on the court, just try to fight, just try to give my best, and that's the only thing you can do."

Czech fifth seed Tomas Berdych fought back from dropping the opening set to oust compatriot Ivo Minar 6-7, 6-0, 6-4 and will now face Austrian Jürgen Melzer, who beat Australian Chris Guccione 7-6, 6-3 in 70 minutes in a night match.

Utseya set to lead in WC

CRICINFO, undated

Zimbabwe have named their provisional 30-man squad for the World Cup, which will be trimmed to 15 by the February 15 deadline.

When the final squad is announced Prosper Utseya, the off-spinner, is expected to be named captain and will rely heavily on players with a modicum of one-day international experience including Gary Brent, Brendan Taylor, Mluleki Nkala and Charles Coventry. Many of the players have very limited exposure at the top level and Zimbabwe are not expected to put up much resistance at the tournament in West Indies. They are in Group D for the qualifying section alongside West Indies, Pakistan and Ireland so will have to pull off an upset to move into the Super Eights.

PROVISIONAL SQUAD

Prosper Utseya, Gary Brent, Chamunorwa Chibhabha, Elton Chigumbura, Tendai Chisoro, Charles Coventry, Graeme Cremer, Keith Dabengwa, Terrence Duffin, Trevor Garwe, Ryan Higgins, Tinotenda Mawoyo, Christopher Mpofu, Tafadzwa Mufambisi, Tavanda Mupariwa, Mluleki Nkala, Edward Rainsford, Piet Rinke, Vusumuzi Sibanda, Gregory Strudom, Brendan Taylor, Sean Williams.

Onus on racial

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system in both the MTN and SuperSport competitions can now be seen, and there is going to be fierce competition for the final berths in the World Cup squad from outside the Proteas. This augurs well for sending a strong, well-balanced and well-prepared squad to meet the challenges of Caribbean conditions against the best in the world."

As part of the preparations a 14-man A-squad has been selected to tour Zimbabwe and play three one-day matches on January 25, 27 and 28.

Juventus snap

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The 26-year-old, who is considered a key player by national boss Karel Bruckner, had insisted that Juve was his first option given the presence of fellow countryman Pavel Nedved.

"He's a great player and if he decided to come here then I would be happy as he's a very good defender," Nedved said on Tuesday.

"He can play on the left, on the right and in the middle which is a real advantage in modern football."

Mourinho denies

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In a separate interview with a German channel he said: "Michael has not done anything amazing yet but he is a team player and sacrifices himself for the team. That is another reason why he plays." Mourinho will select him for Wednesday's Carling Cup semifinal against Wycombe.

John Terry escaped suspension for comments about the referee Graham Poll after he was sent off in November's defeat at Tottenham, but the Chelsea and England captain was fined for improper conduct. The 10,000-pound-penalty is unlikely to trouble him unduly and, although the Football Association issued a strong reprimand, the 26-year-old is likely to be relieved at being free to return for Saturday's home match against Wigan.

Torres rescues

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But the tie was thrown open again when Torres controlled Luis Perea's crossfield pass, cut inside his marker and curled a shot into the top corner to equalise in the 73rd minute.

Six matches were to be played on Wednesday with Primera Liga leaders Sevilla travelling to third division Rayo Vallecano and Barcelona visiting second division Alaves.

Real Madrid are at Real Betis on Thursday.

The second legs are due to be played on Jan. 17.

Reds feel

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a few days and all eyes will be on Benítez at bottom club Watford on Saturday.

"The only thing I can do is say sorry to our supporters because they were the best in the game."

Liverpool's gloom was completed by injuries to Mark Gonzalez and Luis Garcia which Benítez said could sideline them for "a long time."

Arsenal now face arch-rivals Tottenham Hotspur in a two-legged semifinal with Wenger saying afterwards he might well play his youngsters against Spurs. "I am highly tempted. They have earned the right," he said.

Eng banking on Vaughan



AFP, Melbourne

They were thrashed in the Ashes and their recent limited overs record is abysmal, but England hope the return of captain Michael Vaughan will boost their fortunes in the triangular one-day series in Australia.

With the World Cup just months away, the tournament, starting Friday, is an important chance for England, Australia and New Zealand to hone their one-day skills and Vaughan returns to lead an English side seemingly in disarray.

Under the leadership of Andrew Flintoff, they became the first English side to lose an Ashes series 5-0 in more than 80 years, they have not won a match since they arrived on Australian soil more than two months ago, and their one-day international record offers little comfort, with just seven wins in their past 27 games.

On Tuesday, in Vaughan's first game back at the helm, the English were again humbled by Australia, this time in a Twenty20 bash.

England open the triangular series at the Melbourne's MCG on Friday, in another daunting clash with an Australian team strongly favoured to win its third World Cup in succession in the West Indies.

Speaking after the loss on Tuesday, Vaughan admitted the English were struggling, but said

they hoped to gain some momentum in the triangular series.

"We've just got to make sure that over the next couple of days we think up a strategy for the one-day game to try to build up for the World Cup," Vaughan said.

"Playing the No.1 one-day team in the world in their own backyard is going to be pretty difficult, but there's no reason why we can't try to compete and try to beat them in a few of these games.

"That's the main aim of the team now -- to try to develop this thinking towards being successful in the one-day game."

It is an unenviable position in which the 2005 Ashes hero finds himself, as he struggles with his own game as he returns from knee surgery and tries to rebuild England's shattered confidence.

He has not played a one-day international since July 12, 2005 and his record in limited overs cricket is modest, averaging 28.36 with a strike rate of 68.

For England to improve, they will need Flintoff back at his aggressive best with bat and ball and Kevin Pietersen to excel.

Cult figure Monty Panesar will get his chance to impress at one-day level.

Triangular series rival, New Zealand skipper Stephen Fleming, said he expected England to improve sharply with Vaughan back in charge.

"They get their skipper back, who'll make a pretty big difference

and they've got players, the Pietersens and the Flintoffs, who can certainly turn a one-day game on their own," Fleming said.

While Vaughan has his hands full, there are few problems for skipper Ricky Ponting, who can call upon the match-winning talents of the likes of Andrew Symonds, Adam Gilchrist and Mike Hussey.

Opener Matthew Hayden will be out to impress as he looks to secure a World Cup berth at the top of the order, while Brett Lee, Glenn McGrath and Stuart Clark are quality pace bowlers.

Ponting said Australia's Twenty20 form was an ominous sign for the one-day series.

The Kiwis are a proven one-day outfit, coming off a drawn series with Sri Lanka.

They have two of the best bowlers in the world in pacesman Shane Bond and spinner Daniel Vettori, but the Kiwis are resting the injured Kyle Mills, Scott Styris and Jacob Oram.

The performances of Fleming, veterans Nathan Astle and Craig McMillan and wicketkeeper-batsman Brendon McCullum with the bat will be pivotal to their success.

Fleming said the Australians were formidable, but not unbeatable, pointing to the absence of injured all-rounder Shane Watson and the lack of a frontline spinner as weaknesses.

Visa debacle continues



CRICINFO, undated

The impression here continues to be a moneymaking exercise and thus also a 'rip-off' which is the way it still seems to be, for which the reputations of all Caricom countries will suffer.

The shambolic organisation surrounding the issuing of visas for many of those traveling from Australia and New Zealand to the World Cup shows no sign of improving.

Almost a fortnight after the scale of the problem first came to light, it seems that little has been done to alleviate the situation. Mike Agostini, who until recently was Trinidad and Tobago's honorary consul in Australia, reported to Cricinfo that the Caricom Visa issuing offices in Sydney were "are still not operative, or, if so, just barely".

In a letter to Rose Blenman, who is in charge of the implementation of the controversial US\$100 visa, Agostini wrote: "Are you intent on deluding the people wanting such visas, many of whom are continuing to complain, especially travel agents, about the failure of this Mission to provide proper assistance?"

He also flagged that applicants from New Zealand faced an even more difficult problem because of the lack of appropriate information and also the fact that they had to pay for the additional costs of sending their applications and passports to Sydney as well as for their return.

"I am as amazed as I am appalled at what is happening here and looks likely to become much worse, with the deadline for these visas being January 15, 2007 and the issuing office not fully operative and the time stated for issuing of visas and return of passports being still 'up to three weeks.'"

He warned that the whole exer-

cise was set to become a "total debacle" unless the scheme was abandoned. "The impression here continues to be a money-making exercise and thus also a 'rip-off' which is the way it still seems to be, for which the reputations of all Caricom countries will suffer."

Cricinfo has tried to contact Caricom to ask for clarification of the situation but has received no response. We have also asked Cricket Australia whether it has taken up the issue on behalf of supporters but no response has been forthcoming.

Chris Dehring, who is heading the organisation of the event, said: ""We believe the outcome of what Caricom has implemented ... will be much appreciated by fans. The visa cost works out to US\$10 per country which is not particularly high. Also, nationals of many Caribbean countries require a visa to go to Australia and in some cases they have to send their passports to Washington."

Pace worry for teams

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April. He said that key bowlers like Makhaya Ntini and Shaun Pollock should sit out at least one Test each during the series, although he said the strongest possible attack should be picked for the first Test.

Pakistan will be without star batsman Mohammad Yousuf, who is in Pakistan with his ill wife, who is expecting a baby soon, and all-round Shoaib Malik, who is injured.

Pakistan are ranked third in the International Cricket Council Test ratings, three places ahead of South Africa. They shared a three-match series in 1997/98 but on two other tours of South Africa have lost three times in as many Tests.

Centuries by opening batsmen Imran Farhat and Mohammad Hafeez in Kimberley gave the tourists a boost because finding a stable opening pair has been a problem for Pakistan in recent years.

They may find conditions at Centurion different from those in Kimberley, however, with Centurion normally providing assistance to fast bowlers.

TEAMS

**SOUTH AFRICA:** Graeme Smith (captain), Jacques Kallis (vice-

Selector asked to explain

CRICINFO, undated

Bhupinder Singh Senior, the national selector from the North Zone, could have got himself into trouble over comments on Rahul Dravid that appeared in Mid Day, a Mumbai tabloid. Bhupinder was quoted as saying that David's "mind was not on the game" in the last Test against South Africa. Bhupinder has not, so far, denied making these comments, and it is understood that officials of the Board of Control for Cricket in India are unimpressed by his actions.

Although they will not directly take action against Bhupinder just yet, Cricinfo has learned that the BCCI will be writing to Bhupinder on Wednesday seeking an explanation. They will also, in the same missive, be reminding Bhupinder that it is not in his place to be making comments about individual players in the Indian team.

Traditionally, it is only the chairman of selectors who fronts the media and that too largely only in press conferences immediately following the announcement of a team. Even in these cases it is rare for the selector to speak up so stridently against a player, especially the captain.

In case of no further entries, a total of 13 teams will take part in the Senior Division League. They are: Arambagh, Victoria, Wanderers, Wari, Agrani Bank, Youngmen's, Badda, Mohakhali, Dipali, City Club, Sunrise, Purbachol, Jatrabari.

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added 32 for India.

Victoria's Pakistani spinner Jafar Qureshi captured four wickets.

SCOREBOARDS

Scoreboards of the Kai-Altech Premier Cricket League matches at different venues yesterday:

Young Pegasus v Old Dohs

YOUNG PEGASUS

Karim c Shahin b Mahmud	26			
Asif c Shahin b Dollar	0			
Mohon c Mahmud b Dollar	6			
Moniuzzaman lbw Dollar	0			
Saif c Nadif b Shahadat	1			
Sharif lbw Razzak	10			
Jubair c Nadif b Enamul	15			
Raisul c & b Mehrab	32			
Delwar b Shahadat	8			
Mortuza b Shahadat	5			
Kamal not out	0			
Extras: (lb-8, nb-1, wd-14)	23			
Total: (All out in 40.1 overs)	126			
Fall of wickets: 1-4, 2-17, 3-22, 4-36, 5-52, 6-71, 7-80, 8-106, 9-116, 10-126.				
<b>Bowler</b>	<b>O</b>	<b>M</b>	<b>R</b>	<b>W</b>
Shahadat	10	1	36	3
Dollar	5	0	13	3
Razzak	8	0	26	1
Mahmud	6	3	9	1
Enamul	6	0	15	1
Mehrab	5.1	0	19	1

OLD DOHS

Tamim c Jubair b Kamal	54			
Mehrab c Moniruzzaman b Saif	4			
Ehsanul not out	44			
Nadif c Mortuza b Kamal	0			
Akram Khan not out	5			
Extras: (lb-2, nb-3, w-16)	21			
Total: (For 3 wickets in 36.3 overs)	128			
Fall of wickets: 1-21, 2-95, 3-99				
<b>Bowler</b>	<b>O</b>	<b>M</b>	<b>R</b>	<b>W</b>
Delwar	9	1	27	0

Saif	7	0	34	1
Jubair	5	0	20	0
Sharif	7	1	17	0
Kamal	6	0	18	2
Mohon	2.3	0	10	0

Result: Old DOHS won by 7 wickets.

Partex v Sonargaon

PARTEX

ARTXLS					Extras: (lb-1b, nb-2, w-11)					28
Aslam b Ashiquar	2				Total: (For 8 wickets in 50 overs)	190			50	
Raquiubul b Mahbubul	3				Fall of wickets: 1-65, 2-67, 3-75, 4-103, 5-154, 6-166, 7-167, 8-175					
Rajin c Dhiman b Mahbubul	6				<b>Bowler</b>	<b>O</b>	<b>M</b>	<b>R</b>	<b>W</b>	
Tariq b Ashiquar	4				Shahnewaz	7	1	25	0	
Rafiqul lbw Mahbubul	1				Rabiul	5	0	22	0	
Rashed c Marshall b Sharif	10				Jaffer	9	0	14	4	
Neeyamur c Dhiman b Mahbubul	1				Wasel	9	1	34	2	
Rezaul b Mahbubul	0				Nazmul	8	2	18	1	
Hasan lbw Ashiquar	3				Sabbir	8	0	36	0	
Dipazzal c Dhiman b Sharif	1				Saqin	4	0	16	1	
Raihan not out	4				<b>VICTORIA</b>					
Extras: (lb-1, b-1, wd-7)	9				Mabud c Mukhter b Shumon				4	
Total: (All out in 20.5 overs)	4				Nasin not out				52	
Fall of wickets: 1-6, 2-7, 3-17, 4-19, 5-22, 6-23, 7-24, 8-38, 9-38, 10-44					Hasanuzzaman not out				129	
<b>Bowler</b>		<b>O</b>	<b>M</b>	<b>R</b>	<b>W</b>	Extras: (lb-1, nb-2, w-3)				
Mahbubul	8	0	24	5	6	Total: (For one wicket in 33.5 overs)				
Ashiquar	9	3	15	3	191	<b>Bowler</b>				
Sharif	3.5	1	3	2		<b>O</b>	<b>M</b>	<b>R</b>	<b>W</b>	