



West Indies players engage in stretching exercises at the Vidarbha Cricket Association Stadium in Nagpur on Saturday ahead of their first ODI against India on Sunday.

Windies say all OK

Cricket

AFP, Bridgetown

Despite worries over hotels, stadiums and visas, it's beginning to look like the World Cup is coming to the Caribbean as the 50-day countdown to the opening ceremony begins.

Officials from the nine host nations are busily putting things in place for the game's biggest showpiece which officially opens in Jamaica on March 11.

But one issue which threatens to derail the arrival of thousands of fans is the CARICOM special visa which will allow visitors to travel freely throughout the Caribbean for the duration of the World Cup.

The visa will come into effect from February 1 and last until May 15.

In a historic move, the nine host nations have agreed to be treated as a single domestic space.

Their primary intention is to guard against terrorism.

Nationals of the United States, Canada, Germany, Ireland, Italy, Spain, Britain, The Netherlands, South Africa, Japan, France, and all CARICOM nationals except Haiti, do not require a visa.

But citizens of non-exempted countries, such as cricket heavy-

weights India and Pakistan, are required to have a visa.

Barbados' Deputy Prime Minister Mia Mottley has been given responsibility for the Caribbean's security arrangements for the World Cup and she has defended the controversial visa.

"The countries involved in cricket are countries that are involved in the global war against terror," she said.

She noted that the United States, Britain, Australia, India, Pakistan, and Sri Lanka were the largest sources of foreign visitors for the World Cup, and they have all been at the centre of some form of terrorism in recent times.

Mottley insisted that hosting the third largest sport event in the world carried a heavy responsibility, and the Caribbean may be a convenient target for terrorists because of a perception that the security was less stringent.

"We want to send a message that we have invested substantial amounts in security and we have tried to provide a strong environment to protect our citizens and visitors because we recognise that to come back from a terrorist act will be a major hurdle and we simply have no room to manoeuvre as small states," she said.

Meanwhile, personnel from organising committees in St.

Vincent and Guyana have been engaged in simulations of actual match day scenarios to reassure tournament heads that they are all ready.

Further simulations will follow over the next week in Trinidad, Tobago, followed by Grenada, and St. Kitts Nevis.

Barbados, St. Lucia, Antigua, Barbuda and Jamaica will hold their trials next month.

As the countdown gathers pace, the nine host nations have been told they need to brace themselves for the thousands who will descend on the region.

"Of course, a lot of people are coming for the cricket, but a lot are also coming for the party of a lifetime which they expect with such an event taking place in the Caribbean," World Cup managing director Chris Dehiring said.

"These memories will be indelible and we must ensure that we make them as unforgettable as possible, priceless even," declared Dehiring, adding that the knock-on effect of a sensational World Cup would be a fillip to the Caribbean's tourism industry for years to come.

Most of the infrastructure for the event is in place.

This includes new stadiums, where the matches will take place, enhanced airport operations, newly paved roads, and other facilities.

Depending on to whom you speak, Caribbean people are still taking hosting of the World Cup in stride.

It is also very evident in the pattern of ticket sales for which organisers have had to issue several reminders to locals.

Though they all know what is at stake, they have berated the heavy spending. Many feel that the vast sums spent on the World Cup could have been invested in improving roadways, enhancing hospitals, constructing homes for the underprivileged, providing better public transportation, and upgrading other basic social services.

Hartley Henry, a regional political strategist, aptly summed up the general feeling in his column in the Nation newspaper in Barbados.

He wrote: "Somehow one gets the impression that had all this sprucing up been inspired by a genuine desire to make life better for Barbadians first and foremost, less pressure would be on authorities to now play the catch-up game, for the sole benefit of visitors, many of whom will probably not be bowled over by what they see and whose lasting memories of the World Cup will still be what happened on the pitch."

Zimbabwe want Taibu back

INTERNET, undated

A report in the Zimbabwe Independent claims that Zimbabwe Cricket is making a desperate attempt to lure back Tatenda Taibu before the February 11 deadline when squads for the World Cup have to be named.

Taibu retired from international cricket more than a year ago after his family was threatened by people with links to both the government and cricket.

Since then he has played in Bangladesh, England and at the moment is turning out for Namibia in South African domestic competition.

Zimbabwe's cricket, meanwhile, has continued to lurch from crisis to crisis, and following a 5-0 one-day whitewash in Bangladesh at the end of last year, there are real fears that the side could face humiliation in the World Cup.

While Taibu was deeply unhappy with Peter Chingoka, ZC's chairman, it is understood that the real obstacle to his return is the 38,000 dollars he is owed by the board for outstanding match fees.

Two other players who have also quit international cricket -- Andy Blignaut and Heath Streak -- are also believed to be owed more than 100,000 dollars between them.

Despite senior officials insisting the board is not strapped for cash, cheques have bounced recently and sources privately admit that ZC does not have enough to meet such debts at the moment.

"We hope we can talk and agree with Taibu to come back, but maybe he'll demand the money he says Zimbabwe Cricket owes him," a board member told The Independent.

"Other players are being talked to as well."

There's Tinashe Panyangara also who we hear might be in Australia or England." Chingoka recently said that a committee had been formed to try to lure back former players, but critics have pointed out that it is likely to be a short-term solution to try to save face in the Caribbean.

One player briefly mentioned as someone who might return was Ray Price, but a friend of his said that as nothing had changed since he quit, that is not an option.

Many of those who walked away were dismayed at the way Chingoka and those close to him have run the game in recent years, and it will take more than some sweet talk and more promises to lure them back for anything longer-term than the World Cup.

Babbel to hang

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The Germany team that won Euro-96 in England and won a total of 51 caps for the national side, his last coming in 2000, has targeted becoming a manager of a Bundesliga club after his retirement.

Bond is out with a back injury and his place has been taken by 32-year-old Michael Mason.

The Black Caps are also missing key players Scott Styris, Jacob Oram and Kyle Mills through injury.

Styris and Oram will rejoin the squad before New Zealand's clash with England in Adelaide on Tuesday, but Mills may miss the entire series.

In Bond's absence Wellington fast bowler Mark Gillespie, who has impressed in the first two games of the series, will take the new ball.

"The new ball is what I know," Gillespie said. "I've done it all my life so the extra responsibility, I'll just thrive off it."

"You work on bowling plans to each batter but as far as their name goes, they're just another batter."

"As far as their superstar status goes, it doesn't worry me."

Australian Open

The Grand Slam of Asia/Pacific

SECRETS

INTERNET, undated

Maria Sharapova's offseason had a few of the usual things: a couple of sponsor commitments and a few days lying on the beach. It also had an unusual activity: a swing through the jungle at the end of a rope.

The Russian star spent 10 days at a resort in Costa Rica before flying Down Under for the Australian Open, and took a wilderness tour in the Central American country that included flying "400 meters in the air, going 40 mph, on a skinny little rope," she said on her Web site.

"It's so fun, so surreal, you're on a different planet when you do those kind of things," Sharapova said Saturday after advancing to the fourth round of the year's first Grand Slam with a 6-3, 6-1 win against Italy's Tatjana Garbin.

"I love to get an adrenaline rush," she said. "There's only so much sitting on the beach you can do."

In her Internet posting, Sharapova said she spent time laying by the pool and seaside at the resort, and with slices of cucumber on her eyes during daily spa treatments before boredom set in.

"We like the area. We have our routine," she said. "Just really stay in that area, play cards with the other French guys, have some good times at night for dinner."

"We stay at the same place. A few restaurants. I didn't go to my favourite one yet, but I'm going to go soon."

The Frenchwoman has a red wine collection at home in Geneva (Bordeaux is a self-confessed weakness) and lists creamy veal stew and her mother's toasted ham and cheese sandwiches as her favourite foods.

Is the French food in Melbourne up to her usual standard?

"Yeah, it's not bad," said Mauresmo, whose 2006 Australian title began the best season of her career including a second Grand Slam at Wimbledon and the No. 1 ranking for most of the year.

Sharapova said she had absolutely no problem forgetting about tennis for a while in the offseason.

"Like that," she said, snapping her fingers.

But she was brought back to reality when she turned on the TV at one point during her vacation.

"I turned on ESPN, I saw 'Live coverage of the Australian Open starts the 15th of January,'" Sharapova said. "That was the end of that. That was not a good TV experience. It was like, who needs this?"

LEADING THE WAY: Vince Spadea of the United States is leading the Australian Open in a dubious category and it's not even around in singles play.

Spadea was fined 4,000 dollars by tournament officials for verbal abuse and uttering an audible obscenity in his first-round doubles match Thursday -- and his team won.

Spadea and Jan Hernych of the Czech Republic beat Daniele Braccioli of Italy and Dominik Hrbaty of Slovakia in three sets. A day earlier, Spadea lost his second-round singles match to Hrbaty in four sets.

BON APPETITE: Amelie Mauresmo's off-court routine at the Australian Open includes cards, watching her compatriots' matches on TV and some fine French cuisine.

The defending women's champion is staying in the same hotel as in previous years in South Yarra, a riverside suburb that is one of Melbourne's fanciest, with upscale restaurants and boutiques.

The relaxed atmosphere extends to other French players, who also stay nearby.

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"We stay at the same place. A few restaurants. I didn't go to my favourite one yet, but I'm going to go soon."

The Bryans can. The twins from Camarillo, Calif., are chasing their eighth consecutive Grand Slam final appearance to defend their Australian title.

Not all families are so close-knit. Marat Safin said this week he would watch ninth-seeded sister Dinara Safina, if they're going to show it on TV."

He was speaking before his third-round loss Friday to Andy Roddick, which leaves him with more time on his hands to follow the progress of Safina, who faces China's Li Na in the third round.

LOOKING FOR A LOGO: World number three Nikolay Davydenko's search for a clothing sponsor shows no sign of ending despite interest from a Chinese company.

The Russian wore a plain red top provided by his racket sponsor in his Australian Open third-round victory over Fabrice Santoro on Saturday in stark contrast to the logo-laden kits worn by the likes of Chilean world number nine Fernando Gonzalez.

Davydenko was asked at a news conference if any deals were imminent following reports at last year's Masters Cup in Shanghai that a Chinese company was interested.

"At the moment, no," the 25-year-old said. "I will be starting a contract from this year but not with Chinese."

Davydenko, who reached the U.S. Open semifinals last year usually wearing a plain shirt, is the only player in the world's top 10 without a clothing sponsor.

Gilly bats against complacency

Cricket

AFP, Brisbane

Emirates braces

FROM PAGE 20

After a couple of transitional campaigns, Ferguson has sculpted a new side with enough swash in its buckle to rival Arsenal for the title of the country's most entertaining side.

And even if the current United generation go on to lift the league title, the Scot will not want that achievement stained by the memory of two defeats at the hands of his old adversary Wenger, even if Jose Mourinho and Chelsea's appearance on the scene has taken some of the heat out of their rivalry.

"I don't think there is a great deal of difference in experience between the teams," Ferguson said.

"Arsenal got to the final of the Champions League last season and that was a great bonus for them considering the number of young players they have."

Despite a stuttering start to their campaign, Arsenal passed United off the pitch on their way to a 1-0 victory at Old Trafford in October and not even Ferguson would quibble with the outcome that afternoon.

"They deserved to win that day and this should be another fantastic game," he said. "Both teams are playing excellent football and it is a difficult one to call."

With no major injury concerns, Ferguson has his own difficult call to make in attack, with Louis Saha now fit again after a recent groin problem.

The signs are, however, that he will continue with the promising combination of Rooney and loan signing Henrik Larsson, who has proved since his arrival at Old Trafford that he has lost none of the zest and guile that helped him deliver last season's Champions League trophy for Barcelona at Arsenal's expense.

Memories of that night still give

Wenger, in his own phrase, nightmares and the Frenchman admits to being a fan of Larsson.

"It's a player I like a lot, for his intelligence and his team attitude," Wenger said. "I thought that his time was over but there he is at 35, still playing up front. It's amazing."

Rooney is without a goal in his last seven matches and has claimed just one in his last 13 outings. But Ferguson remains a believer. "Wayne just needs a break," he insisted. "But he is a big-game player and it will come."

Wenger has more to worry about on the injury front with centreforward William Gallas sidelined and influential midfielder Gilberto Silva ruled out through suspension.

Inzy puts Pakistan

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17 five-wicket haul in Tests.

Inzamam was fortunate to

survive an appeal for a catch behind off Andre Nel when he was on 13 in the over after Sami's dismissal.

The ball went through to

wicketkeeper Mark Boucher off

Inzamam's pad and umpire Peter

Parker gave him not out. But slow motion replays showed that he got an inside edge to the ball before it brushed his pad.

It could have been even worse

for the home side if umpire Daryl

Harper had given Hussey out

caught behind when the West

Australian was on 19.

But they were forced to fight

hard for the win despite bowling the tourists out for just 155.

They lost six wickets in reaching

the victory target of 156 and were