

Fans unite for Mashud

SPORTS REPORTER

Support for Khaled Mashud has come from different quarters after he was omitted from the national team that will play in next month's World Cup in the West Indies.

Abahani have heavily criticised the exclusion of their club captain Mashud, questioning its logic. They have also raised doubts over the axe on their middle-order lynchpin Tushar Imran, who was dumped from the Tigers side.

The fourteen elected directors of Bangladesh Cricket Board (BCB) have also protested on Mashud's omission. They have questioned if it was vengeance on the selection committee's part that led to Mashud being dropped.

Our Rajshahi University Correspondent adds: Demanding inclusion of former national captain Khaled Mashud from the national side, all the sportsmen, sports organisers, supporters and sporting clubs of Rajshahi submitted a memorandum to the Bangladesh Cricket Board president MAbdul Aziz.

Mashud's father and former footballer Shamsul Islam, popularly known as 'Shamsu bhai' also expressed his sadness to newsmen saying that the BCB made a big mistake and dishonoured his son.

In the memorandum sent to the BCB, the sports organisers of Rajshahi demanded immediate change of the decision and include Mashud in the team.

City set for Mpenza deal

AFP, Brussels

Manchester City are set to sign Belgium striker Emile Mpenza on a short term-deal until the end of the season with an option for a further three years, according to the player.

Mpenza, 28, is a free agent after terminating his contract with Qatari club Al-Rayyan at the end of last month.

He arrived in Manchester on Wednesday, was due to have a medical Thursday and is hopeful of being in the City squad for the FA Cup fifth round clash with Preston at the weekend.

"This move is like revenge for me against everyone who criticised my decision to go to Qatar," Mpenza told the Bel-RTL radio station on Thursday. "To play in England is like a dream come true for me."

The international forward has previously played for Mouscron and Standard Liege in Belgium as well as German clubs Schalke 04 and Hamburg.

Man cleared over Becks kidnap plot

AFP, London

A British newspaper admitted Wednesday it wrongly identified a Romanian man as involved in an alleged plot to kidnap football star David Beckham's wife Victoria and their children.

Lawyers for Bogdan Maris, identified under the pseudonym Alin Turcu, said News Group Newspapers agreed to make a "modest" donation to a charity of Maris's choice as well as to his legal costs.

In November 2002 the News of the World, under the headline "Posh Kidnap," reported that it had foiled a plot by an international gang to kidnap Beckham's wife and their two infant sons.

The biggest-selling Sunday tabloid said they intended to kill Beckham's wife if her husband did not meet a five million pound ransom demand. The report was followed up by another article in the daily The Sun. Maris, 25, who arrived in Britain in 1999, was identified in both articles by photographs accompanied by his pseudonym Alin Turcu. Hewas said to have been involved in the plot as a surveillance expert.

He was arrested the following day and held on remand for eight months, but returned to Romania after a June 2003 trial collapsed as it emerged that a key witness was paid for feeding news to News of the World.

On Wednesday Ben Beaby, lawyer for News Group, insisted that "there was a plot to kidnap Victoria Beckham," but admitted: "The defendant now accepts that this plot did not include the claimant."

Maris welcomed the admission. "I am just very relieved that after almost five years the News of the World has finally accepted that I was not part of any plot to kidnap Victoria Beckham," he said.

The settlement also cancels an order made in the High Court for Maris to pay the newspaper's 400,000 pounds in legal costs. Maris also received a public apology in the Court of Appeal.

Britain's domestic Press Association news agency said it understood that the appeal was based on fresh evidence from Florim Gashi which emerged after the High Court libel trial.

Gashi was the main source for the story, but was not called by the newspaper to give evidence at the trial.



PHOTO: AFP

Venezuelan President Hugo Chavez inspects the Copa America trophy during the draw in Caracas on Wednesday.

Tough draw for Brazil



REUTERS, Caracas

Holders Brazil landed a tricky draw for the Copa America on Wednesday as they were thrown into Group B along with Mexico, Ecuador and Chile.

Brazil lost 1-0 in their last meeting with Mexico while Ecuador reached the last 16 at the World Cup in Germany and Chile appear set for a revival with a talented crop of young players.

The draw was kinder to hosts Venezuela who will face Uruguay, Bolivia and Peru -- the latter pair regarded as the weakest two of the 12 teams -- in Group A.

Argentina, beaten on penalties by Brazil in the 2004 final, will face United States, Paraguay and Colombia in Group C full of potential pitfalls.

The tournament, being held in Venezuela for the first time, takes place from June 26 to July 15.

Brazil will be taking part in their first competitive matches under new coach Dunga, who replaced Carlos Alberto Parreira following their unhappy World Cup last year.

"Brazil's group is competitive and will certainly cause us difficulties," Dunga told the Brazilian Football Confederation's official web site.

"But that is a characteristic of the competition, which is always tough." "Every team which plays against Brazil tries harder," he added. "And it's wrong to say that Chile are the weakest opponents, as some people may think. All the opponents are tough."

After a show featuring

Venezuelan Llanero music, former Brazil striker Careca and former Venezuela striker Luis Mendoza took it in turns to draw the teams' names from glass pots.

The South American Football Confederation (CSF) had pre-empted the draw by hand-picking six of the teams and placing them in their respective groups on Tuesday night at a meeting behind closed doors.

Venezuela and Bolivia were placed in Group A, Brazil and Mexico in Group B and Argentina and United States in Group C, leaving only six teams to be drawn on Wednesday.

The competition will be an important warm-up for the teams ahead of the South American qualifiers for the 2010 World Cup which are due to begin later this year.

The U.S. and Mexico, who are not part of the CSF, are taking part as guests.

SCHOOLS CRICKET Nazmul cracks double century

SPORTS REPORTER

Nazmul smashed a hurricane double hundred, the first in the school cricket competition this year, as Combined International School annihilated Scholastica by 199 runs at the Kalindi Club ground yesterday.

The schoolboy struck 12 sixes and 22 boundaries in his amazing knock, which took only 136 balls. He was well supported by Mahmud who hit 78 as Combined piled 392 all out in 49 overs. Saif took five for 53.

Scholastica could muster only 193 runs in 34.5 overs with Hafiz and Haider contributing 47 and 43 respectively.

At the East End ground, European Standard School beat Incidin Bangladesh by five wickets. Sanjeeb took four wickets for the winners.

There was an identical win at the adjacent Dhupkhola Jagannath University ground as KL Jubilee School beat Mohammadpur Model School and College by five wickets as well.

New Era rode on Mozammel's 67 as they trounced Islami Adarsha by 102 runs at the Housing Estate ground while the match at Uttara Friends Club ground was the closest of the day with Kamapara High edging past Armanitola High School by just a wicket in a pulsating match. Raju hit an unbeaten 37 as his knock ensured his school the victory with fourteen overs in hand. For Armanitola, Shahid hit an attractive half-century.

Our Correspondent from Satkhira adds: Police Line High School and Satkhira Government High School won their respective zonal matches yesterday in the Standard Chartered Young Tigers National School Cricket Tournament.

Police Line defeated Alipur by 43 runs at Satkhira Government College ground.

Police Line High school scored 123-9. Alipur replied with only 80 runs.

At Satkhira Stadium, Satkhira Government High School defeated Karima High School by 15 runs.

Howard seals Everton deal

AFP, Liverpool

United States goalkeeper Tim Howard signed Wednesday a five-year contract with Everton, for a fee reported to be in the region of 3 million pounds, having been on loan with the Goodison Park club from Premiership leaders Manchester United since the start of the season.

Howard joined the Merseyside club with his Old Trafford future in doubt.

But his form for the Toffees prompted United manager Sir Alex Ferguson to discuss bringing him back when his loan ended.

However, United have new England international Ben Foster - on loan to Watford - and Polish keeper Tomasz Kuszczak as back-up to Edwin van der Sar.

Howard's new deal will start from the beginning of next season and run until 2012, with the current loan continuing for the rest of the campaign.

United paid 2.3 million pounds for the 27-year-old from New York/New Jersey Metrostars in July 2003 and he played 77 games for them before moving to Everton this pre-season.

He has since made 27 appearances for Everton, including an impressive 11 clean sheets.

"The club share my ambition, that is for sure, the manager does and so do the fans," Howard told evertontv. "I was drawn to the club for a number of reasons and the players in the dressing room are one of them."

Everton manager David Moyes said: "We are delighted to have signed Tim on a permanent basis. He has come in this season and proved he is a good keeper and we are pleased to have secured him."

Howard has won 16 international caps for the United States, the most recent in the 2-0 win over Mexico last week.

Diarra admits poor form

AFP, Madrid

Mahamadou Diarra says he's unhappy with his level of play since joining Real Madrid from French champions Lyon at the start of the season.

"I recognise that up to now it hasn't been good, only average," the Mali international acknowledged on Wednesday.

"I can do a lot better. If I had to give myself a report I'd say I've been mediocre."

But despite his dip in form Diarra has no regrets from moving to the Bernabeu.

"It was my decision to come to Real. I'm very happy here and I'm proud to be part of this club."

"I don't have a problem with anyone in the dressing room and my relationship with (manager) Fabio Capello is good."

The midfielder moved to Madrid on a five-year contract worth a reported 26 million euros last August.

Less friendlies for England



AFP, London

Steve McLaren has told his England players they have to take responsibility for their performances, British media reported on Thursday, while giving individual player advice and attempting to cut friendly commitments.

England lost 1-0 to Spain at Old Trafford last week bringing criticism from media, supporters and other football pundits that an upturn in fortunes was needed with a tough away trip to Israel on March 24 and a home tie with Andorra four days later.

McClaren confirmed he could abandon some England friendlies and replace them with training camps.

Although the Football Association are committed to playing 18 friendlies over the course of the four-year television deal which comes into effect following Euro 2008, there is enough flexibility within the contract for England not to have to play every time a date is available.

In the aftermath of last week's debacle against Spain, McClaren's assistant Terry Venables suggested it would be better for England not to play friendlies and instead push themselves through three meaningful training sessions.

With the new Wembley Stadium to pay for, there is no chance of the FA abandoning friendlies en masse. Instead, McClaren will pick his way through the fixture calendar in an attempt to ensure every England game retains some meaning.

"The key thing for me is getting more time with the players," the England manager said. "If more time means having get-togethers with no end result and we achieve something, yes, I would like that. But I want the flexibility to be able to control when we have friendlies and when we have get-togethers."

"The Greece friendly in August was a good one - and we needed a reaction in Holland in November, so it was important to get our best players available on that occasion."

"Maybe this one came at a bad time. We ended up using it as an experiment, because we didn't have seven or eight of our senior players."

It could be argued McClaren contributed to his own downfall against Spain, given he reached an agreement with Liverpool boss Rafael Benitez for Steven Gerrard to feature for only 45 minutes.

In addition, McClaren discarded half-a-dozen players on fitness grounds - including Wayne Rooney, Wayne Bridge and Andrew Johnson who went on to play for their clubs at the weekend.

However, McClaren is ada-

mant he made the right decision and is positive he will gain the benefits next month when England visit Israel, and then again in June when his side wrap up their season in Estonia.

"We have to look after the players," he said. "We know at this stage of the season players are carrying knocks, and it was my decision whether to play them or not. It was a very frustrating five days from naming the squad to reaching the day of the game."

"But we had to look at the bigger picture and not risk anyone at this stage - because we need them later on."

McClaren also said he had given the players a run-down of their individual performances against Spain. He told the Daily Mail: "Each of the players has been delivered an individual DVD of their performance and individual stats."

"We analyse each game and it's the job of my assistant, Steve Round, who is very good on the IT and stats side of it. The players know they are accountable. They always know that."

"We always give them feedback -- positive, negative, whatever we feel. That's something we always do. We're analysing the game and looking at what happened and making sure we all learn from that and take it forward."

Carrick unworried by drought



AFP, Manchester

Scholes since arriving at Old Trafford. "I wouldn't say there was a massive difference in the way I am playing compared to Spurs but there is one."



MICHAEL CARRICK

He added: "I am just enjoying being part of this fantastic side. It feels like everyone is playing unbelievably well, so it is understandable I have a lot of confidence. It makes it a lot easier to pick people out

because you have so many options."

Carrick is set to be in the United team for Sunday's FA Cup fifth round tie at home to Premiership high-flyers Reading.

Portugal wing Cristiano Ronaldo should also be back after a virus ruled him out of last weekend's victory over Charlton.

Ronaldo has been repeatedly moved with a link to Spain, his Portugal team-mate Hugo Viana saying the 22-year-old had told him he was on the verge of leaving Old Trafford.

But United assistant manager Carlos Queiroz insisted Ronaldo was staying put. "He has no interest in leaving the Red Devils for Real Madrid. I know that Cristiano would not improve his situation by going to Real Madrid."

"At Manchester United he is part of a family and knows he can eventually become a great legend of this club," said Queiroz.



PHOTO: AFP

Livorno and Espanyol players line up in an empty Armando Picchi stadium before their UEFA Cup clash on Wednesday. Livorno are forced to play behind close doors after violence in the Italian league.

CROSSWORD By Eugene Sheffer

ACROSS									
1	Morse "T"	5	Dressed	9	The girl	12	Reed instrument	13	Helper
14	Energy	15	It has its highs and lows	17	Ram's companion	18	Escape	19	Actress
20	Wit	21	Swiss city	24	Temperate	25	Winged	26	High-scale seriousness
30	Round Table	31	Drunkard	32	Geneticist's abbr.	33	Lucas epic series	35	Its longevity was topped by "Phantom"
36	"Swell"	37	Vatican VIPs	38	Almost out of	40	Dorothy's pooch	42	Bobby of hockey
43	Nigel Tuftel's band	48	"Clown"	49	Pitcher	50	Relaxation	51	Kreskin's specialty
52	Inquisitive	53	Parks or Bonheur	54	Right angle	55	Inventor	56	Whitney
57	Low voice	58	Settled down	59	Tinfoil alternative	60	Church service	61	Capricorn
62	Capek play	63	Initial stake	64	Back talk	65	Big name in frozen food	66	Speedwagon letters
67	Ice chest	68	Sch. org.	69	Earring site	70	Raw rocks	71	Cravats
72	Siblings	73	Expert	74	Confucians' path of virtue	75	Fool	76	Pod resident

Solution time: 21 mins.

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ENDANGER	ICON	
OTIO	KIM	
ADAMS	AVIA	
NINA	IMPERIL	
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RISKING	YANE	
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CRYPTOQUIP

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Yesterday's Cryptoquip: IF YOU KNEW ABOUT ST. NICK'S HOLIDAY HELPERS, I SUPPOSE THAT COULD BE ELF-AWARENESS.
Today's Cryptoquip Clue: W equals T