

Akhtar in the clear

AFP, Karachi

The Pakistan Cricket Board on Friday cleared maverick paceman Shoaib Akhtar of indiscipline and suspended a 5,000-dollar fine, while warning him to stay out of trouble for six weeks.

The fast bowler had been fined 100,000 rupees (1,650 dollars) for leaving a training camp in Karachi earlier this month without informing manager Talat Ali, and 200,000 rupees for snubbing a subsequent hearing.

Ali said that after a fresh inquiry ordered earlier this week the paceman had been cleared.

"Akhtar has been exonerated after a warning as he explained that the entire incident was the result of miscommunication," said Ali.

Akhtar had appealed against the fine on the grounds that he was not given advance notice of the hearing, having only been told after the fine was imposed, PCB officials said.

The 32-year-old fast bowler also pleaded that he had told captain Shoaib Malik that he was leaving the camp. Malik agreed but said he had informed the paceman to also tell Ali, they said.

"Ali conducted the fresh inquiry after which it has been decided to suspend the fine for the next six weeks and in case of another breach the bowler will be fined 100,000 rupees," PCB spokesman Ahsan Malik told.

An appellate committee had on Monday ordered a fresh inquiry into the alleged breach of discipline by the bowler.

Akhtar said the PCB's decision would put him in the right frame of mind to play.

"The episode had disturbed me no end. Now I can focus on my game and play my part in the Twenty20 World Cup," said Akhtar.



New Real Madrid recruits, Gabriel Heinze (L) and Arjen Robben pose with a club ball during their presentation at the Santiago Bernabeu on Thursday.

League of stars returns

AFP, Madrid



Real Madrid and Barcelona have splashed out almost 200 million euros to bankroll their title aspirations but it's the cut-price Jose Antonio Reyes who aims to shine as the new La Liga campaign gets underway this weekend.

Champions Real have led the way with an estimated 120 million euros (160 million dollars) outlay on eight new players including Argentine defender Gabriel Heinze, Dutch winger Arjen Robben and Brazilian defender Pepe.

Barcelona have spent 70 million on the likes of French striker Thierry Henry, defensive compatriot Eric Abidal and Argentine defender Gabriel Milito.

Atletico Madrid, determined to feature alongside Seville and Valencia as contenders, has also spent a similar sum.

But as the new season begins one man for who Real would not open the chequebook will be seeking to trip up the club who spurned him.

It was thanks to Reyes' two goals in the final minutes of the season that Real pinched the championship from under Barcelona's noses but the hierarchy at the Bernabeu would not pay the 12 million euros Arsenal wanted for the Spanish international winger.

Instead, he joined Atletico after Real offered just half the asking price.

Now Reyes plans to derail his old teammates.

"I knew one day I would eventually wear Atletico's colours and they are the ones who really rated me and pushed for me to come," said Reyes.

Of his return to the Bernabeu, this time wearing red and white, he said: "It will be a special game to make my debut for Atletico in the Bernabeu stadium."

Looking to help Reyes in his ambitions are Uruguayan striker and former Manchester United striker Diego Forlan, who has signed from Villarreal, as well as midfielder Luis Garcia, newly recruited from Liverpool, and rising Argentinian star Sergio "Kun" Aguero.

With Valencia adding Real veteran Ivan Helguera and German international keeper Timo Hildebrand to shore up their

defence, and Seville bolstering their back four with Khalid Boulahrouz from Chelsea, this season could become a five-team race.

It may not necessarily bode well, however, for the Spanish national side that Real and Barca have primarily gone Dutch, French and Latin American in their transfer market delvings.

Real will have Robben feeding Ruud Van Nistelrooy with Royston Drenthe and Wesley Sneijder pulling midfield strings while Barca, who traditionally are the more Dutch-influenced of the two, will have Frank Rijkaard looking for his third Liga title at the Nou Camp helm.

Real coach Bernd Schuster, one of a select band to have played for Real, Barca and Atletico, has tried to load the pressure onto the Catalan club, insisting it will take time for his new team to settle and making his rivals the title favourites.

"It will be very hard to reach the summit, but we are going to get to a good level - even if that risks taking time as I have realised we had to change many things in the players' mentality," said the German, who is glad the 'galactico' era of David Beckham and company is over.

Barca will look to get off the mark

with three points at Racing Santander, who have spent nothing this summer.

"Good players can always play together," insisted Rijkaard when asked how he would fit the Frenchman into an attack already containing Samuel Eto'o, Ronaldinho and Leo Messi.

UEFA Cup winners Seville open their campaign against Schuster's former side Getafe, now coached by Dane Michael Laudrup and the side they beat in the Spanish Cup final.

Seville coach Juande Ramos is still on board despite reports of an approach from English Premiership early strugglers Tottenham.

Valencia open their season at home to neighbours Villarreal, who ended last season strongly.

FIXTURES

(all times in GMT)
Saturday
 Real Madrid v Atletico Madrid (1800), Seville v Getafe (2000)
Sunday
 Racing v Barcelona, Mallorca v Levante, Deportivo La Coruna v Almeria, Recreativo v Real Betis, Murcia v Real Zaragoza, Athletic Bilbao v Osasuna (all 1700), Valencia v Villarreal (2000), Espanyol v Valladolid (21:00)

Work cut out for Inter

AFP, Rome



Rome-based sides AS Roma and Lazio will be looking to wrest the Scudetto back from the stranglehold of their northern rivals as the Italian 2007/2008 championship gets underway this weekend.

The Serie A looks set for a hotly-contested battle this season after the fallout from the Italian match-fixing scandal which marred last year's competition.

Inter Milan won the title for the second straight year at a canter after also being declared champions for 2005/2006 when Juventus were stripped of their crown.

AS Roma were the last side outside the industrialised north to win the title when they claimed the Scudetto in 2001, the year after Lazio won the championship.

Last season's runners-up Roma missed an opportunity to bring the title back with Juventus demoted to the Serie B and Fiorentina, Lazio, AC Milan, Reggina and Siena all starting the season with points deductions.

But AS Roma served notice of their intentions for this term as they followed up their Italian Cup victory with a Super Cup win over defending champions Inter Milan last weekend.

Lazio, who finished third, kick-off

their season at home Saturday against Torino, who missed the drop last season by just one point, with Roma travelling to Sicily to take on Palermo on Sunday evening.

Being the only team to beat Inter last season with their 3-1 victory at the San Siro, and their Cup wins has left Roma coach Luciano Spalletti in optimistic form.

"The wind has changed. Now Roma can go to the San Siro and be the number one team to beat this season," said Spalletti.

Roma have signed two experienced players in Brazilian defender Juan from Bayer Leverkusen, as well as French midfielder Ludovic Giuly, winner of the 2006 Champions League with Barcelona.

Brazilian defender Cicinho is set to sign a four-year deal from Real Madrid, and apart from Inter-bound defender Christian Chivu, the team remains intact with top scorer and captain Francesco Totti deciding to end his international career to help his club's quest for their second title

after 2001.

"This is a different Roma compared to last season and this season we have more possibilities. Now, I expect continuity," said Totti, warning that Roma's ambitions extend to the Champions League.

Juventus coach Claudio Ranieri has high hopes for his side who have been boosted by a 57 million euro spending spree as they start their season back in the top flight at home Saturday against Livorno, who finished 11th last season.

"We will fight for the first places in the championship. We want Champions League football," said Ranieri.

Inter Milan kick-off off their title defence at the San Siro against Udinese on Sunday as European champions AC Milan, fresh from signing Brazilian midfielder Emerson from Real Madrid, travel to promoted Genoa.

Promoted Napoli, who have just signed Italian midfielder Emanuele Blasi and Uruguayan striker Marcelo Zalayeta from Juventus, host Cagliari as Fiorentina, fifth last season, face a potentially tricky tie against Empoli.

Elsewhere Parma host Catania, Sampdoria travel to Siena and Reggina are at home to Atalanta.

FIXTURES

(all 1400GMT unless stated):
Saturday
 Lazio v Torino (1700), Juventus v Livorno (1930)
Sunday
 Fiorentina v Empoli, Genoa v AC Milan, Inter Milan v Udinese, Napoli v Cagliari, Parma v Catania, Reggina v Atalanta, Siena v Sampdoria, Palermo v AS Roma (19.30)

Nat'l team play last match against Zim

SPORTS REPORTER

After their senior colleagues bowed out of the Nehru Cup without making any impact, Bangladesh's second-string footballers play their last match in the Merdeka Cup in Malaysia today.

Bangladesh's last group match against Zimbabwe will begin at 4.30 pm (Bangladesh time) at the Shah Alam Stadium in Kuala Lumpur.

The game, however, will not be treated as a full international as Zimbabwe brought their Select team with coach Sunday Chidzamba choosing a squad of some veterans, who have always been on the fringe of breaking into the national team, and some up-and-coming players eager to make an impression.

Bangladesh have lost both their games, 1-0 to Indonesia and 2-1 to Singapore but the Zimbabwe Select bounced back after a 4-2 loss to Singapore when the Africans downed Indonesia 2-1 on Thursday.

Singapore, who meet Indonesia in the today's other match, have already confirmed a place in the semifinals after first-half goals by Ridhuan Muhammad and Fazrul Nawaz had sealed a win over Bangladesh, who were the more aggressive side on Thursday.

Sachin gives India flying start

SPORTS REPORTER

India got off to a flying start in the second one-day international against England when they rattled 146 for one in 25 overs after skipper Rahul Dravid elected to bat on a placid track at Bristol.

Sourav Ganguly was the only man out when the left-hander was caught by Paul Collingwood off Andrew Flintoff in the 20th over after sharing in a 113-run opening stand with Sachin Tendulkar.

Sourav hit five fours and one six. Tendulkar, who was batting on 86, crossed the 1,000-run mark against England in ODIs. He clubbed 15 boundaries and one six off 90 deliveries.

Yuvraj Singh was unbeaten on four. England lead the seven-match series 1-0.

Sourav pleased

CRICINFO, undated

Former Indian captain Sourav Ganguly has applauded the management skills of the current Indian coaching staff and was pleased that the tour has proceeded without any "hiccups".

Ganguly, who had some major differences with former India coach Greg Chappell, was happy with the current atmosphere in the dressing room, adding that the team did not need a "professor" to coach them at this level.

"The youngsters have enjoyed themselves," Ganguly told when asked about the dynamics in the team. "It's been a lovely dressing room, a free dressing room. No hiccups, not many controversies off the field, not too much rubbish going around, which has been good. It's been fantastic."

"We have coaches -- Robin [Singh] and Venky [Prasad] have been superb," he said. "They've been nice, their man-management skills have been worth watching. Chandu Borde has been nice. Lot of people said he's 73 when he got appointed. He may not be the most active because of his age but the batting ideas he gives -- stands behind in the nets, watches every ball -- that's all you need."

"You don't need a professor at this level. You don't need to treat international players like students. What are you going to teach Sachin Tendulkar, Rahul Dravid or Anil Kumble? What are you going to tell them? [There are] minor things which you notice in the nets you come and tell them, 'This is what I feel, this is how you can do it better'. And Mr Borde does it perfectly."

"We've had some good success on this tour, but it will be too simplistic to say it's because we haven't had [a coach]," he said. "There are other factors that have gone into us playing well. You can't just focus on the coach."

"Sometimes you're in the team and looking at it from one perspective. People from outside can look at a team and see the direction it's going in. They must provide some intelligence and input as well."

Bangladesh routed

Football

SPORTS REPORTER

Kyrgyzstan tore apart an exhausted Bangladesh 3-0 yesterday to stay alive for a final berth in the Nehru Cup.

Vadim Herchenko was unstoppable and the winger exploited the tired legs of the Bangladesh defenders to set up a brace for Hurshid Lutfullaev and one goal for Ruslan Djamshidov, the striking duo who toured Bangladesh during the AFC Challenge Cup in April last year.

With two wins from three matches, Kyrgyzstan now face a must win situation against hosts India, who also have six points but enjoy a better goal difference.

Ruslan wasted an early chance against Bangladesh, who ended their campaign with three defeats in four games inside just seven days, retained the same line-up from their 1-1 draw against Cambodia two days earlier.

After the wake-up call, Syed Nayeemuddin's boys took brief control with strings of passes and Zahid Hossain hammered the ball inches wide from 30 yards in the 26th minute.

Two minutes later, makeshift rightback Ariful unnecessarily lingered with the ball and conceded a corner which helped Kyrgyzstan go ahead when Hurshid, crowded by three defenders, stabbed in a low cross by Herchenko.

Bangladesh's first shot on target, a freekick by Alfaz just after interval, went straight to goalkeeper Maxim.

A counter attack in 54th minute doubled the lead for the central Asians as Hurshid's diving header from seven yards on a right-flank centre by Herchenko gave Biplab no chance.

Three minutes later Herchenko's attempted cross deflected off Rajani to Ruslan who made no mistake to shoot a left-footer on the turn into the low left corner of Biplab.

Emily came close twice in the last 15 minutes to reduce the arrears but the Bangladesh striker failed to nod a Rajani freekick before placing wide from a tight angle.

BANGLADESH TEAM: Biplab, Ariful (Mishu), Rajani, Nazrul, Waly, Zahid (Zahed Parvez), Arman Aziz, Abul, Titu, Emily, Alfaz (Ujjal).

INDIA-SYRIA
 AFP adds: Syria entered the final of the Nehru Cup with an all-win record when they edged hosts India 3-2 on Thursday.

Sunil Chetri put India ahead in the 13th minute, but Khaled Mansoor drew level for the Syrians 10 minutes later.

Star striker Zyed Chaabo almost sealed the match in Syria's favour when he scored twice just before and after the interval to give his side a 3-1 lead.

India, backed by loud support from 5,000 home fans, fought back to narrow the margin through Krishnan Nair in the 81st minute, but failed to get the equaliser in the final minutes.



India opener Sourav Ganguly drives through the cover during the second NatWest ODI against England at the County Ground in Bristol on Friday.

FOOTBALL BRIEFS

AFP, undated

Real sign Robben, Heinze

Real Madrid pulled off a major double signing as they unveiled Dutch winger Arjen Robben and Argentine full-back Gabriel Heinze at the Santiago Bernabeu on Thursday.

Dutch winger Robben, 23, arrived from Chelsea on a five-year deal and a fee of around 30 million euros while Argentine defender Heinze, 29, joins from Manchester United on a four-year deal for 12 million euros.

Chelsea rope in Belletti
 Chelsea have signed Brazilian international right-back Juliano Belletti for an undisclosed fee from Spanish giants Barcelona on Thursday.

The 31-year-old signed for the English Premier League club after passing a medical and agreeing personal terms. Spanish newspapers are reporting that the deal is worth about 5.5 million euros.

EU clearance for Ronaldinho

Brazilian ace Ronaldinho is set to be handed a Spanish passport, allowing his club Barcelona to recruit another non-European player, the Spanish club announced Thursday.

Young Mexican Giovanni Dos Santos is also set to be handed double nationality "in the coming days", according to the club.

Matrix under the knife

Controversial Italian defender Marco Materazzi has undergone an operation to remove a build up of blood in his thigh, which he injured during Wednesday's embarrassing 3-1 friendly defeat to Hungary.

The 34-year-old's doctor revealed

details of the operation to the press on Thursday and moved to calm fears that the Inter Milan centre-back would face a lengthy lay-off.

Cicinho leaves for Roma

AS Roma have completed the signing of Brazilian full-back Cicinho from Real Madrid. The marauding right-back had found himself out of favour at the Santiago Bernabeu signed a five-year deal with the Roman club for a fee in the region of 11 million euros.

Brazil name squad

Brazil have named their squad for the friendly international against Mexico at Foxborough, Massachusetts, on September 12.

SQUAD

Goalkeepers: Doni (AS Roma/ITA), Julio Cesar (Inter Milan/ITA)
Defenders: Daniel Alves (Sevilla/ESP), Gilberto (Hertha Berlin/GER), Kleber (Santos), Maicon (Inter Milan/ITA), Alex (Chelsea/ENG), Aex Silva (Sao Paulo), Juan (AS Roma/ITA), Lucio (Bayern Munich/GER)
Midfielders: Fernando (Bordeaux/FRA), Gilberto Silva (Arsenal/ENG), Josue (Sao Paulo), Mineiro (Hertha Berlin/GER), Diego (Werder Bremen/GER), Elano (Manchester City/ENG), Julio Baptista (Real Madrid/ESP), Kaka (AC Milan/ITA), Ronaldinho (Barcelona/ESP)
Attackers: Alfonso (Heerenveen/NED), Robinho (Real Madrid/ESP), Vagner Love (CSKA Moscow/RUS)



Did U Know?

Table tennis made its debut as an official Olympic sport in the Seoul Games in 1988.

What to WATCH

ZEE Sports

Nehru Cup Football
 Cambodia v Syria
 Live from 7:30 pm

ESPN

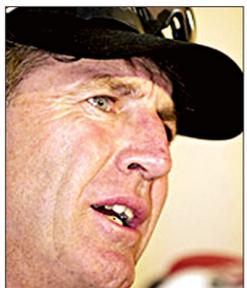
English Premier League
 Sunderland v Liverpool
 Live from 5:40 pm
 Arsenal v Man City
 Live from 7:55 pm

STAR Sports

English Premier League
 Chelsea v Portsmouth
 Live from 7:55 pm
 Everton v Blackburn Rovers
 Live from 10:10 pm

Primera Liga

Real Madrid v Atletico Madrid
 Sevilla v Getafe
 Live from 2:00 am (Sunday)



John Wright

(Former India cricket coach)
 "I'm definitely keen to help the current internationals if they want me. I don't want to interfere or step on anyone's toes, but I'd certainly be available if someone wanted me to work with a specific player or players."

After taking charge of the New Zealand A team.