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Nepal U-19s arrive in town

UNB, Dhaka

Nepal's under-19 cricket team arrived in Dhaka yesterday to play three one-day matches against Bangladesh under-19s during a week-long stay.

Former Sri Lanka batsman Roy Dias is accompanying the side as coach.

The visitors will play the first one-day match on Thursday at the Fatullah Cricket Stadium while the second game will be held at the same venue on January 26 while the third and final match on January 28 at the BKSP in Savar.

After completion of the three match series, the Bangladesh under-19 will be involved in a four-match one-day series against the West Indies, who are expected to arrive here on January 29 as part of their preparation for the upcoming ICC Under-19 World Cup to be held in Malaysia.

ITF U-14 TENNIS Malaysians dominate

SPORTS REPORTER

Malaysia won the boys' and girls' singles titles in the Mobil ITF Asian 14/Under Tennis Championships yesterday but were denied a third as they lost in the boys' doubles.

Merzuki Mohammad Asri clinched the boys' singles title beating Naom Amer of Syria 6-4, 6-4 while Boey Adelle defeated fellow Malaysian Selvarajoo 6-3, 6-3 in the girls' singles final at the National Tennis Complex in Ramna.

Cambodian pair Orm Sambath and Kan Sophan triumphed the boys' doubles final edging Malaysia's Asri and Syed Mohammad 6-3, 4-6, (7-6) (6) in a keenly contested final.

Malaysia had a share of glory when Choo Lyn paired with Abdul Raouf of Bahrain to win the girls' doubles final defeating Kalih Grace of Libya and UAE's Janahi Fatma 6-3, 7-5.



PHOTO: AFP

Russian star Maria Sharapova blows a kiss to the crowd after her triumph over Belgian world number one Justine Henin in their quarterfinal match at the Australian Open in Melbourne on Tuesday.

Maria sends Justine packing

Australian Open
The Grand Slam of Asia/Pacific
AFP, Melbourne

Maria Sharapova demolished shellshocked top seed Justine Henin to confine her to the Australian Open quarterfinal scrapheap Tuesday alongside defending champion Serena Williams.

In an awesome display that left the world number one helpless, the Russian fifth seed, giving full voice to her trademark grunt, ended Henin's 32-match winning streak with a crunching 6-4, 6-0 victory.

She will now play Serbian fourth seed Jelena Jankovic, who shattered Williams' dream of retaining her title in a 6-3, 6-4 drubbing.

Henin's last previous defeat was in the Wimbledon semifinal last July, a winning run that made her the most dominant woman since Steffi Graf 18 years ago.

But she never looked in the match against Sharapova, who

held the Belgian to 6-0 love in a set for the first time since Jennifer Capriati in Montreal in 2002.

"I really felt like I was in my own bubble today," said Sharapova.

"I came on the court; I wasn't trying to pay attention to her record or how many tournaments she won, which is an incredible number."

"It's amazing when you go out on court and you feel like you're doing the right thing."

Sharapova, out to avenge a humiliating loss in last year's final to Serena Williams, led from the outset and never looked back.

In her match, Williams was outgunned by Serbia's third seed Jankovic, who played through the pain barrier to overcome the American eight-time Grand Slam champion after receiving treatment during the match for a painful left thigh.

The 22-year-old labelled the win her best Grand Slam performance as she finally overcame the injuries that marred her early matches this year, revelling in getting her own back after Williams beat her here

last year.

"Getting revenge it feels so good. I'm so happy to be in the semifinal, after having no expectations, having injuries and not really thinking that I can go far," she said.

Williams, seeded seventh, was the hot favourite going into the match, and she acknowledged she blew her chances.

"The match was on my racquet and I gave it away," she said after failing to progress beyond the quarterfinals at her fourth straight Grand Slam.

"I went crazy, maybe, and I made a lot of mistakes. I didn't really play the game I wanted to play."

In Wednesday's other quarterfinals, Federer plays 12th seed Blake while in-form Serb Novak Djokovic is up against fifth seed David Ferrer of Spain.

On the women's side, six-time Grand Slam champion Venus Williams takes on Serbian fourth seed Ana Ivanovic and Polish dark horse Agnieszka Radwanska, seeded 29, challenges Slovak ninth seed Daniela Hantuchova.

Hayden boosts hosts

Cricket

REUTERS, Adelaide

The return of Matthew Hayden has given Australia a huge confidence boost ahead of the fourth and final Test against India starting on Thursday.

The Queensland opener scored centuries in each of the first two Tests, both won by Australia, but a hamstring injury forced him out of last week's third match, surprisingly won by India.

Hayden has declared himself available for the final match and his teammates believe his return will swing the balance back in Australia's favour.

"Obviously Matt coming back into the side will make a big difference to our team," Hayden's opening partner Phil Jacques told a news conference on Tuesday.

"He has a wealth of knowledge, he's got lots of experience and is a great guy to have in the team."

Hayden had not missed a Test for Australia since 2000 and his impact on the team's success was all the more noticeable by his absence at Perth.

His replacement, Chris Rogers,

made only 4 and 15 on his debut, while Jacques, who has only played seven Tests, also failed with scores of 8 and 16.

Jacques said he could not blame his failure on the absence of Hayden but admitted the presence of his more experienced partner did make it easier for all the top-order batsmen.

"My mindset didn't change much not having Matt there but obviously having him there will give the whole side a boost."

"Every Test we play we get a better understanding of running between the wickets and how each other plays. It's definitely good to have a regular guy there."

The Australian batting failed miserably in the first innings in Perth, dismissed for just 212, as the top-order struggled to cope with the swing generated by India's seamers.

Jacques said he expected the Indians would not get as much movement at the Adelaide Oval while the Australian batsmen would be ready for them this time.

"They bowled with some very good discipline and they batted pretty well, but I think if we're honest we didn't play the way that

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Prime Bank to sponsor NFL, B. League

SPORTS REPORTER

The cloud over this season's football competitions seemingly began to evaporate after Prime Bank gave its green signal to the Bangladesh Football Federation (BFF) to sponsor two major tournaments.

Although the bank a few days earlier regretted that it would be unable to provide sponsorship for football this season for commitment in other sports, it had a sudden change of heart.

"My meeting with the Prime Bank MD was positive and the bank has agreed on principle to sponsor the B. League and the National Football League (NFL) in 2008," told BFF's acting president Monir Ahmed last night.

Monir, who met the Prime Bank high-up on Monday, said the BFF has asked the bank to give Tk one crore each for the two events.

"The meeting was very successful. Though the bank has to get approval in its board meeting, I am confident we will get the bank's support," added Monir.

Earlier on January 15, the Prime Bank informed the BFF that it would not be able to provide the whole Tk 9.5 crore budget of the federation for running 21 events scheduled for 2008.

However, the two parties sat to reconsider the bank's decision following an initiative taken by the Bangladesh Olympic Association, which in alliance with the National Sports Council had convinced different banks to sponsor different sport federations.

"It was a misunderstanding between us. They thought they would have to cover the whole budget but this time, we specifically asked them for two major tournaments."

The BFF, which failed to hold the NFL last year, has yet to collect any part of the Tk 75 lakh sponsorship money -- promised by India's Leisure Sports Management -- for last year's B. League, the inaugural professional leagues.

Ganguly dropped at Dhoni's call?

PTI, Adelaide

An observation by Indian team's trainer Gregory King coupled with captain Mahendra Singh Dhoni and his deputy Yuvraj Singh's opinions might have prompted the selectors to drop Sourav Ganguly from the one-day squad for the forthcoming cricket tri-series.

King, who keeps a tab on the fitness of Indian team, apparently believed that Ganguly's lower half could give him trouble before long and this went a long way in sealing the fate of the pugnacious left-hander.

Selectors Dilip Vengsarkar, Ranjib Biswal and Venkatapathy Raju, on the present tour, were keen to have Ganguly retained as late as on the second day of the Perth Test last week.

They even toyed with the idea of recalling Rahul Dravid, basing their argument that Rohit Sharma and Robin Uthappa had not done much of note in the domestic circuit lately.

Dhoni though had different ideas and informed the selectors that it did not serve much purpose to include a player who could break down at some stage of the one-day tour.

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Clubs hanker for money

Cricket

SPORTS REPORTER

Soon after confirmation of the inter-club players transfer's new schedule, focus has shifted to speculation of 'who will play for whom' in the upcoming Premier Division Cricket League.

Some top clubs have already moved to negotiate with their desired players after Cricket Committee of Dhaka Metropolis (CCDM) fixed February 3-5 for the player's enlistment on Monday.

But the reality is that this season's 'market' is not pleasing for most players, especially for the mediocre ones, as most of the clubs are going through financial crisis, being unable to spend huge amounts of money for the players.

"BCB has offered financial package for the clubs which only help clubs to maintain the daily expenditure but you have to have sponsors for making a good team and the reality is that the majority

of clubs have to work hard to get financial supports from individuals because of current circumstance," said a club official on condition of anonymity.

Defending champions Abahani, Mohammedan, Biman and Victoria are believed to have made good teams but it is unlikely for recent big-spenders Old DOHS and Sonargaon Cricketers to come up with big offers for the players.

City Club, Partex, Young Pegasus, Kalabagan Krira Chakra, BKSP and Surjo Torun will more or less depend on average players.

The main attraction, however, is with the destination of the national players and there are speculations of some big names changing tents, including national skipper Mohammad Ashraful.

Although he will stay in Dhanmondi, the ace batsman who captained Sonargaon Cricketers last season is most likely to go to a different club.

There is also discussion on Habibul Bashar as it was learned that Mohammadan are seriously

thinking whether they would continue with the former national skipper who lost his place in the one-day squad of the national side.

But everything about the national cricketers are at a preliminary stage as the clubs are quite cautious to decide on the stars as they will be missing a number of matches due to national duty. BCB have already announced a 21-member national pool, which also includes wicketkeepers Khaled Mashud and Mushkeer Rahim.

"It is confirmed that the national players will miss at least first 8-9 rounds for the home series against South Africa. That's why we have to calculate everything before spending on them," said a club official.

"Actually we are in trouble to make the team because of the players' international commitment as you know that most of the promising players will also be involved in national duty," he added.

Despite all this, most of the cricketers are desperately trying to get a team for the season with at least respectable remuneration.

Bhajji set for return

Final Australia-India Test from tomorrow

Cricket

AFP, Adelaide

Australia and India are both set to gamble on recalled players in their fourth and final Test at the Adelaide Oval, starting here Thursday.

Trailing 2-1 but determined to square the series, India seem almost certain to recall spinner Harbhajan Singh after relegating him to 12th man duties for the third Test at the WACA Ground.

If India win in Adelaide, it will be the first time since the two sides met in 2003-04 that the Australians have failed to win a home series.

Harbhajan was suspended for three Tests following the contentious second Test in Sydney, but is free to play pending an appeal that appears certain to be heard after the series.

His absence enabled India to

play three fast bowlers in Perth and while the move worked as the Indians broke Australia's 16-match winning streak with a 72-run victory, the seamers are less likely to have a major impact here.

India may drop struggling opener Wasim Jaffer and reshuffle its top order, enabling Mahendra Singh Dhoni to bat at six and all-

TEAMS

AUSTRALIA (likely): Ricky Ponting (captain), Matthew Hayden, Phil Jacques, Mike Hussey, Michael Clarke, Andrew Symonds, Adam Gilchrist, Brad Hogg, Brett Lee, Mitchell Johnson, Stuart Clark, Shaun Tait (12th man).

INDIA (likely): Anil Kumble (captain), Virender Sehwag, Rahul Dravid, VVS Laxman, Sachin Tendulkar, Sourav Ganguly, Mahendra Singh Dhoni, Irfan Pathan, Harbhajan Singh, RP Singh, Ishant Sharma, Dinesh Karthik (12th man).

rounder Irfan Pathan at seven, or they could axe a fast bowler.

Either way, Harbhajan is likely to be wanted to partner captain Anil Kumble with the spin duties, despite Virender Sehwag's pivotal cameo with the ball in Perth.

Harbhajan picked up seven wickets in the first two Tests, but significantly established an important ascendancy over Australian captain Ricky Ponting, who has been well off his best form in the series.

Ponting fell to Harbhajan, who has played 62 Tests for 255 wickets, three times in the first two Tests and has been dismissed by the off-spinner eight times in as many Tests.

Australian opener Mike Hussey said here Monday the Australians were unsure which way the Indian selectors would go.

"All their bowlers bowled pretty

SEE PAGE 18 COL 2



PHOTO: AFP

NO CRACKS: Sourav Ganguly (L) looks on as off-spinner Harbhajan Singh prepares to bowl during India's practice session at the Adelaide Oval on Tuesday.

No rift, says Dhoni

Cricket

REUTERS, Adelaide

India vice-captain Mahendra Singh Dhoni has denied reports of a rift in the team over the selection of the one-day squad to tour Australia.

There has been an angry reaction in India to the omission of Sourav Ganguly from the squad, with newspapers reporting a split in the ranks.

But Dhoni, who will captain the one-day side when Test skipper Anil Kumble returns home after this week's final Test in Adelaide, said there were no problems in the India camp.

"I think it has affected journalists more than it has us," he told a news conference on Tuesday.

"We are back in the practice session, we trained in the morning. It has not affected us anyway."

India will be joined by Sri Lanka in a triangular one-day series starting in Australia next month.

Dhoni refused to talk about the make-up of the squad until the final Test is over but said spirits within the Indian camp were high and they were confident of winning

the final Test to square the four-match series.

"It's a very happy unit we have at the moment," he said.

"We have played well and it will be a moral victory to come to Australia and not let them beat us comfortably."

Dhoni was also reluctant to speculate on the line-up for the final Test, starting at Adelaide Oval on Thursday, but said the tourists were considering starting with five bowlers.

The tourists played three pacemen and a lone spinner in last week's third Test win in Perth but could play an extra spinner in Adelaide because the traditionally flat pitch usually turns.

Paceman Irfan Pathan was named man of the match in Perth after replacing Harbhajan Singh but the spinner is expected to make a comeback.

India's other two seamers, strike bowler Rudra Pratap Singh and impressive teenager Ishant Sharma, also performed strongly in Perth, troubling the Australians with their swing, to ensure they are chosen again.

Dhoni admitted the Indian selectors faced a tricky decision on the line-up and it would ultimately

depend on the state of the pitch.

"If we play with five bowlers that means you have to sacrifice one batsman," he said.

"It's always a pleasure to have bowlers in a Test team because you know every bowler has the capacity to take wickets."

"It really helps to have five bowlers but you have to compromise on lots of other things."

"We have not had a look at the wicket yet but the think-tank and the management will decide on that."

India draw Lee praise

PTI, Adelaide

Australian pace spearhead Brett Lee has said India deserved all the credit for winning the Perth cricket Test but he also mentioned that the home side did not play its complete game for a victory.

"(In Perth) they bowled well, definitely, we have to give credit to India, they played extremely well, we probably didn't get the runs we wanted to, I thought we bowled

SEE PAGE 18 COL 5



Did U Know?

Under Herbert Chapman, who managed the club from 1925 to 1934, The Arsenal changed their name to simply Arsenal in order to appear at the top of the alphabetical list of old Division One clubs.



Talk Turkey



Rahul Dravid

(Former India cricket captain)
"Nobody gave us a chance to win the Test but we showed what we can do. It was a team effort and I am happy for (Anil) Kumble and the boys that we came up with a remarkable win."
After winning the Perth Test on Saturday.



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STAR Cricket
Australia v India
Fourth Test, Day One
Live from 6:00am (Thursday)