

LOCAL SNIPPETS

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the Outer Stadium handball ground. The final will start at 3pm.

Bangladesh Police came from behind to eliminate Bangladesh Ansar 25-18 in the first semifinal while BDR brushed aside Rajshahi 36-18 in the second semifinal.

Bangladesh Handball Federation president and Industries Secretary Dr Mohammad Nurul Amin will distribute prizes as chief guest.

CHESS QUALIFIERS

FM Syed Mahfuzur Rahman Emon and Abdul Malek led the table jointly with seven points after eight rounds of the 34th National Chess Championship qualifiers.

Emon drew with second-placed Javed, who is on 6.5 points, but Malek improved his position beating FM Sheikh Nasir Ahmed.

BEST CRICKETER

Mohammed Mithun of BKS received the Cane Craze Trophy for the sport institution's best cricketer award of 2007. BKS DG Brig Gen Shawkat Hossain, who gave away the trophy at the Savar institute, also handed over sports gear to the cricketer.

SCHOOL VOLLEYBALL

The boys' and girls' finals of the South Breeze school volleyball tournament will be held today at the Dhaka Volleyball Stadium.

In the boys' semifinals, Children Academy ousted sponsors South Breeze School 2-0 while BIT defeated Emarat Hossain High School 2-1. In the girls' competition, Viharunissa Noon School edged Green Herald 2-1 while SOS Shishu Pally also beat Scholastica by same margin.

Eminent freedom fighter and sports organiser Maj Gen (ret'd) Amin Ahmed Chowdhury will distribute prizes as chief guest.

TABLE TENNIS

The KDS International table tennis tournament will begin today in Chittagong at the Chittagong Rifles Club gymnasium.

All the leading teams of the national championships and the Dhaka leagues have been invited for the three-day meet where competition will be held in six events -- men's, women's and boys' team and singles. A total of 16 men's teams, eight women's teams and nine boys' teams are expected to take part in the event, which will be declared open by sponsors KDS Group chairman Khalilur Rahman.

GAIBANDHA CRICKET

Abahani Krira Chakra recorded a comfortable 58-run win over Sunrise Sporting Club in the first division cricket league here at the Gaibandha Stadium.

In reply to Abahani's 197 for eight in the allotted 50 overs built around Palash's 53-ball 59, Sunrise were all out for 139.

Sharma rubbishes Buchanan's idea

PTI, New Delhi

Pace sensation Ishant Sharma yesterday refused to follow the advice of former Australian coach John Buchanan that he needed to "build muscles" so that his wiry frame could sustain pressures of international cricket.

"I don't think I need to build strong muscles. I feel I am completely fit," Sharma said on the sidelines of a function here.

Buchanan, who will coach Sharma in the Kolkata IPL team, had said that the gangling bowler should concentrate on building muscles to withstand the rigours and pressure of excessive bowling.

The towering bowler also declared himself fit for the South African series, saying he had recovered from his finger injury, which prevented him playing in the second final of the CB tri-series in Australia.

"I am fit now," he said replying to a query on his recovery from injury but refused to elaborate because of BCCI's gag order.

However, his coach Shrawan Kumar confidently declared that the young pacer was fit to play in the upcoming South African Test series.

"He has recovered from his injury and we hope that he will play Test series against South Africa. Though he has to undergo a fitness test and final decision (on his fitness) will be taken only after that," Kumar said.

Clubs decline

FROM PAGE 17
leagues start after that," said a club official.

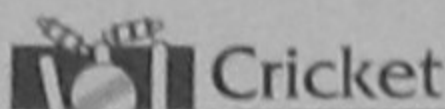
The decision, however, is likely to irk the footballers whose interests have not been protected by federation and club now and again.

The federation, in fact, had announced the calendar out of the blue only after the players had threatened to go into demonstration in demand of starting the football season.

When the BFF election will take place on April 28, it would be nine months of 'football-less-ness' for players, the time one needs to give birth to a child.

When a new committee takes a decision, it could well take one full year to roll football to the ground. Can the footballers afford that?

'Pakistan paying price'



AFP, Karachi

Cricket legend Imran Khan said Wednesday that Pakistan was paying the price for backing the US-led "war on terror" after Australia postponed a tour of the troubled country.

Imran, who captained Pakistan to World Cup glory in 1992 and then retired to become an opposition politician, blamed President Pervez Musharraf for the Australian decision to pull out of the tour.

"Musharraf blindly follows the United States in the war against terror and we are paying the price. Because of that we are now at a stage when no one is ready to play cricket here," Imran told AFP.

Imran said fans would feel deprived by Australia's pull out from the tour, in which they were due to play two Tests and three one-day internationals starting from March 29.

"People feel the Australians are unjustified in pulling out, but Australia's decision is understandable as everything that happens in Pakistan is magnified to larger proportions abroad," said Imran, who played 88 Tests for his country.

Australia put off their tour to Pakistan on Tuesday over security fears on the day when two blasts left 26 dead in Lahore -- a city where they were due to play a Test

and one-day match.

"Australians don't live here and they don't know that bombings are not aimed at sportsmen but terrorists' targets are specific. No one has ever targeted sportsmen in Pakistan."

Imran has been a vocal opponent of Musharraf, who seized power in a military coup in 1999 and then backed the US-led invasion of Afghanistan in late 2001 following the September 11 attacks on the United States.

He heads the opposition Movement for Justice party and was detained for several days in November when Musharraf declared a state of emergency and locked up thousands of opponents.

Imran accused the Musharraf

regime of fomenting violence by carrying out military operations in Pakistan's troubled tribal belt bordering Afghanistan, an alleged haven for Al-Qaeda and Taliban militants.

"No Pakistani was involved in 9/11 and there was no history of suicide bombing in Pakistan, yet we are now engulfed in terrorism and since we are fighting someone else's war, we are in trouble," Imran said.

"Our own army is waging a war against Pakistani civilians in tribal areas and in turn they are taking revenge, which has endangered daily life."

Imran said cricket in Pakistan would lose out in terms of money and interest.

"This pull out by Australia will make Pakistan cricket poorer. Had they toured it would have created a lot of interest as everyone wants to see them play here. That is gone now for at least until the tour is rescheduled," he said.

"Pakistan will also lose revenue by not hosting a high-profile series and we have come to a position where we only play minnows like Zimbabwe and Bangladesh."

The Pakistan Cricket Board Tuesday said they were insured against any losses from the pull-out and had arranged a five-match one-day series and a Twenty20 match series with Bangladesh, the schedule of which will be announced soon.

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Lanka leave veterans out

AFP, Colombo

Sri Lanka on Wednesday left out senior pros Sanath Jayasuriya and Muttiah Muralidaran from a 15-man squad for the upcoming one-day series in the West Indies.

Young fast bowler Lasith Malinga will also miss the three one-dayers in mid-April due to a foot injury, Sri Lanka chairman of selectors Asantha de Mel said.

Left-handed Jayasuriya, 38, and off-spinner Muralidaran, 35, were omitted as part of a long-term plan to build a team for the 2011 World Cup, to be hosted jointly by India, Pakistan, Sri Lanka and Bangladesh.

Jayasuriya, who is one-day cricket's second highest scorer with 12,310 runs from 411 matches, was dropped after poor form in the recent tri-series in Australia won by India.

Jayasuriya retired from Test cricket in December but was keen to play one-day cricket for a few more seasons.

"He (Jayasuriya) did not perform well in Australia," de Mel told AFP. "We have three years to groom a team for the 2011 World Cup and younger players must be given a chance."

Muralidaran, who has a world record 723 Test wickets to his credit and 464 one-day scalps, will play the two Tests that precede the one-dayers in the West Indies.

Off-spinner Ajantha Mendis, 23, will replace Muralidaran for the one-dayers while left-handed Mahela Udawatta will come in place of Jayasuriya.

All-rounder Kaushalya Weeraratne, 27, stages a comeback after playing the last of his 11 one-dayers in 2003.

The three one-dayers will be played in Port-of-Spain, Trinidad (April 10 and 12) and Saint Lucia (April 15).

The two Tests will be held in Guyana (March 22-26) and Port-of-Spain (April 3-7).

SQUAD

Mahela Jayawardene (captain), Kumar Sangakkara, Tillakaratne Dilshan, Chaminda Vaas, Chamara Silva, Upul Tharanga, Chamara Kapugedera, Malinga Bandara, Kaushalya Weeraratne, Nuwan Kulasekera, Ajantha Mendis, Jehan Mubarak, Ishara Amarasinghe, Mahela Udawatta, Thilina Mirando.

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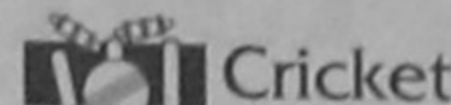
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ENGLAND DROP HS
Second Test against
NZ from today

AFP, Wellington

England have axed experienced pace bowlers Steve Harmison and Matthew Hoggard in a bid to save the Test series against New Zealand after their humiliating 189-run first Test loss.

Harmison was widely expected to lose his place for the second Test starting here Thursday but the dropping of Hoggard was more of a surprise.

James Anderson returns for his 21st Test after getting some match practice last week playing for Auckland in New Zealand's first class cricket.

Also back is Stuart Broad, who made his Test debut against Sri Lanka last year.

Harmison and Hoggard, with 124 Test caps between them, struggled in the first Test, taking a combined two wickets at the cost of 278 runs.

Skipper Michael Vaughan said it was a difficult decision to drop the veteran pair, both of whom have played heroic roles for England at the side of their captain in the past and have 460 Test wickets between them.

"It's a tough call," Vaughan admitted.

"We had a gut feeling we needed to make a change, the attack needed a bit of a shake-up," Vaughan told reporters.

"At the minute they're not bowling to the standards they set themselves."

Anderson and Broad did not make a big impression in the one-day series won 3-1 by New Zealand but Vaughan said he was confident they would rise to the occasion in the crucial Test.

"It's a great opportunity for the young lads to stamp their authority on Test cricket," he said.

"It's quite an exciting time, a new attack leading into a Test match. They're a little bit lacking in experience but I think they've got enough talent to put the New Zealand batsmen under a lot of pressure."

Ryan Sidebottom, who bowled brilliantly to take 10-139 in the first Test -- including a second innings hat-trick -- will spearhead the English attack in Wellington.

New Zealand have made one change to their team, with seamer Mark Gillespie brought for his second Test ahead of spinner Jeetan Patel.

Patel worked well in tandem with skipper Daniel Vettori in a twin spin attack in Hamilton but the Wellington wicket is expected to be more seam-friendly than Hamilton.

Vettori is hoping pacemen Kyle Mills and Chris Martin can repeat their heroics from Hamilton when they spearheaded an attack which skittled England out for just 110 in

the second innings.

But Vettori told journalists he was expecting England to be a tougher proposition this time around.

Vaughan is also expecting his batsmen to bat more positively this time after being criticised for their timidity in the first Test.

"It's a difficult one because you don't want to come out with a reckless mindset and start swinging from ball one, but you have to make sure you have an intent to score and get on top of the opposition," he said.

"A lot of our players do like to dominate and for some reason at the moment we're not being allowed to."

If New Zealand can win the second of the three Test series, it would be only their fourth series win over England and their first against them at home since 1984.

TEAMS

NEW ZEALAND: Daniel Vettori (captain), Matthew Bell, Jamie How, Stephen Fleming, Ross Taylor, Mathew Sinclair, Jacob Oram, Brendon McCullum, Kyle Mills, Mark Gillespie, Chris Martin, Jeetan Patel (12th man).

ENGLAND: Michael Vaughan (captain), Alastair Cook, Andrew Strauss, Kevin Pietersen, Ian Bell, Paul Collingwood, Tim Ambrose, Stuart Broad, Ryan Sidebottom, James Anderson, Monty Panesar.

Pakistan papers
accuse Aussies

AFP, Karachi

Pakistani newspapers on Wednesday accused Australia's cricket team of handing a victory to "terrorists" after the world champions refused to tour the country due to security concerns.

"World champions or a bunch of cowards" said the headline on the sports page in The News, an English language daily, a day after Australia scrapped the tour in the wake of twin bomb blasts in the eastern city of Lahore.

Cricket Australia and Pakistan Cricket Board mutually announced the decision, saying they hoped the series that was due to start on March 29 could be rescheduled in the near future.

"It might sound like a cliché but by chickening out of what was a challenging assignment, the Aussies have handed the terrorists operating in this unfortunate country a major victory," the newspaper said.

The tour had been in doubt since the assassination of former Pakistan prime minister Benazir Bhutto in December last year. A wave of bombings since the February 18 elections sealed the fate of the tour.

The security and safety fears have been a talking point in Australia's dressing room with all-rounder Andrew Symonds and paceman Brett Lee showing reservations on touring a country where Australia have not played since 1988.

"The Australians, it is believed, made up their mind against touring Pakistan after the assassination of Bhutto but players like Symonds had been cribbing about the visit much before the tragedy," said the News.

"It is true that Pakistan is not the safest of places but these days bombs have a tendency to go off anywhere in the world. Australia haven't toured Pakistan in more than a decade. Almost all other teams have visited Pakistan."

The article also blamed the multi-

million dollar Indian Premier League (IPL) for playing a part in putting off the tour.

Another English-language newspaper, The Nation, described the tour postponement as "a win for terrorism."

"People believe that scrapping the tour won't do any good to the game and would rather be a win-win situation for the terrorists," said the newspaper.

Pakistan slams
death of cricket
fan in Indian jail

AFP, Islamabad

Pakistan's foreign ministry on Wednesday demanded an explanation from India over the "mysterious" death in custody of one of its nationals who crossed the border to watch a cricket match.

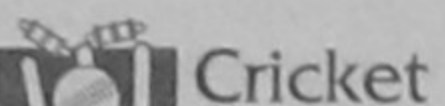
The body of Khalid Mahmood, 26, was brought back to Pakistan earlier this week, three years after he went to the Indian town of Mohali to see a game between the Pakistani and Indian cricket teams.

His relatives have alleged that Mahmood was tortured to death by Indian police after he was picked up while going to the Pakistani embassy to report that he had lost his passport.

"The death of Khalid Mahmood in custody should be condemned in strongest terms," Pakistani foreign ministry spokesman Muhammad Sadiq told reporters in Islamabad.

Pakistan's envoy to New Delhi was also kept in the dark about Mahmood's 2005 arrest and he was not on lists of prisoners exchanged by the two countries as part of a peace process launched in January 2004, Sadiq said.

Aussie players relieved



AFP, Melbourne

Australia's cricketers said Wednesday they were relieved Cricket Australia cancelled their planned tour of Pakistan this month over security concerns, admitting they feared for their safety.

Batsman Michael Clarke said the decision had avoided the possibility of boycotts from individual players, several of who had previously publicly voiced fears about security in Pakistan.

All-rounder Andrew Symonds was the most vocal, admitting last month he would likely have made himself unavailable if the tour went ahead.

"I don't think 'disappointed' is the right word -- I'm rapt (delighted) Cricket Australia and the ACA made the decision and it didn't have to come down to individual players," Clarke told reporters Wednesday, referring also to the Australian Cricketers' Association.

"I'm happy it's been sorted out without the players' involvement."

I'm very relieved and happy they've done that for the playing group."

Clarke dismissed comments Tuesday, the day Australia made its announcement, by Pakistan's former Australian bowler Geoff Lawson, who said the tour should have gone ahead.

"My opinion is Geoff can stay there as long as he likes," was Clarke's terse reply.