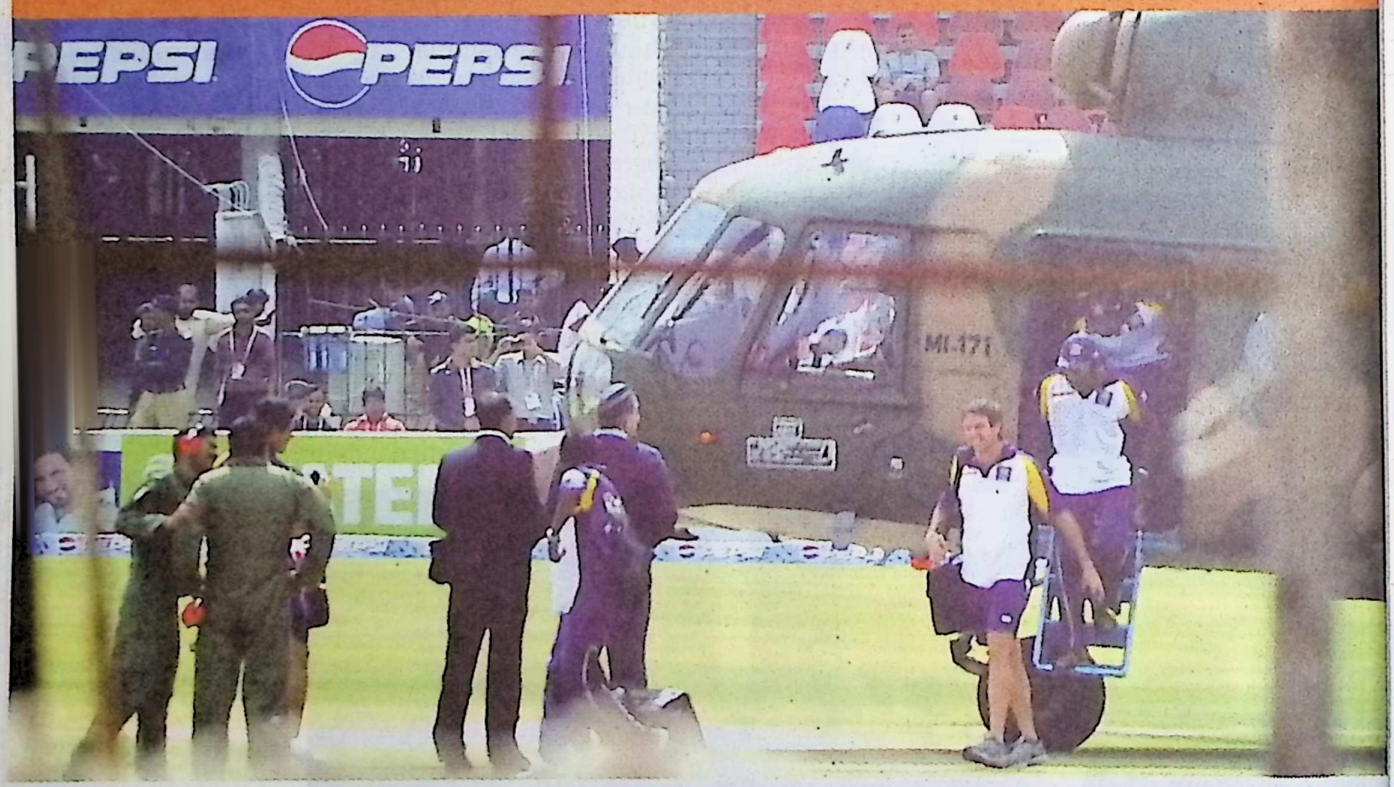
A Heavy Price to Pay



Sri Lankan cricket team members disembark from a Pakistani military helicopter onto the playing surface at The National Stadium in Lahore on March 3, 2009. Pakistani air force helicopters evacuated the Sri Lankan cricket team -- including two players on stretchers -- from the stadium after a deadly ambush. AFP PHOTO

Sri Lanka's cricketers paid a heavy price Tuesday for agreeing to tour a country nobody else was prepared to visit.

They only stepped in after India cancelled a much-anticipated January-February series here due to simmering political tensions between the two countries over the Mumbai terrorist attacks last November.

That cancellation was the third major cricket event called off in Pakistan in the past year, after Australia refused to tour in March and the ICC postponed the elite eight-nation Champions Trophy set for August until 2009.

It was a disaster for the Pakistan Cricket Board who said at the time that the Indian pullout would lose them least 25 million dollars.

While Sri Lanka initially committed to fill the Indian void the tour came into question after the country's sports minister, Gamini Lokuge, disbanded the interim national cricket board and sacked its chairman Arjuna Ranatunga.

But in December Sri Lankan President Mahinda Rajapakse finally gave the green light, making the team the first to play a Test in Pakistan since South Africa in October 2007.

"Sport is an effective means of promoting connectivity between nations and thereby enhancing friendship and mutual goodwill between countries," Sri Lanka's Foreign Minister Rohitha Bogollagama was quoted as saying at the time.

Barely two months later and his team was being helicoptered out of Pakistan's eastern city of Lahore after masked gunmen opened fire on their team bus, wounding eight members of the tour party -- seven players and a coach.

The Sri Lankan team first played international cricket in 1975, and were awarded Test status in 1981, which made them the eighth Test playing nation.

Routinely seen as a cricketing minnow, they transformed themselves into a major force during the 1990s, winning the 1996 World Cup by beating Australia in the finals.

Since then they have continued to be a major force,