India need to regroup

Second ODI against SA today

Cricket

AGENCIES, Johannesburg

Thrashed in the first game in Durban, India would hope to put up a far more inspired display as they go into the second one-dayer against South Africa here on Saturday with a few problems to sort out in both the bowling and batting departments.

The Indians did well by drawing the Test series 1-1 and then winning the only T20 game on Sunday, but the humiliating 135run defeat in the first match came as a big blow for the visitors who have to regroup before it's too late.

Already plagued by injuries to key players, nothing seemed to have gone right for Mahendra Singh Dhoni and his men in Durban as both the batting and bowling left much to be desired.

The Indians have a track record of not doing too well in the first match on tours and Dhoni and his men will be looking to bounce back and level the five-match series 1-1 at the New Wanderers ground which is likely to aid the pace bowlers.

Already missing key players such as Virender Sehwag and Gautam Gambhir, the injury list has only grown longer with paceman Praveen Kumar also returning home

because of an injury.

Paceman S Sreesanth is also recovering from an elbow injury, which forced him to sit out of the first match, and it remains to be seen whether the Kerala speedster is fit enough to take the field today.

Batting has been India's strength but the top order collapsed like a pack of cards to be reduced to 43 for four in the first match, and the team could never really recover from that jolt.

Sachin Tendulkar, returning to the Indian one-day fold after close to a year, has a big role to play and the champion batsman has to take up the responsibility of giving India a competitive total on the board.

The Indian line-up has a number of young but talented players such as Murali Vijay, Rohit Sharma, Virat Kohli and Suresh Raina but they have to fire when it matters most.

Kohli was the only batsman to score a half century in the last game unlike the South Africans who had three batsmen coming up with substantial contributions. The failure to build partnerships made India's chase all the more difficult. For the off-colour Yuvraj Singh, it is the

final chance to convince the selectors that he is the same destructive force who won India many a matches before the stunning slump



PHOTO: AFP

China's Li Na holds the Sydney International trophy in delight after beating reigning champion Kim Clijsters of Belgium 7-6 (7/3), 6-3 in the final yesterday.

Li upsets Kim to title

Tennis

AFP, Sydney

China's Li Na upset two-time champion Kim Clijsters to win the Sydney International title and her fourth career WTA crown on Friday.

Eighth seed Li recovered from going behind 0-5 in the opening set to rally for a convincing 7-6 (7/3), 6-3 victory in 1hr30min.

It was her second WTA title in Australia after winning the Gold Coast event in 2008 and last year she was a surprise semifinalist at the Australian Open. Li, 28, will stay at her 11th ranking despite the win, while

Clijsters missed the chance to move up from number three to two in the rankings ahead of Russian Vera Zvonareva. It was Li's second victory in six encounters with US Open

champion Clijsters and her first win over the Belgian in three matches at the Sydney tournament. Clijsters, 27, who won in Sydney in 2003 and 2007, had

been a perfect 13-0 in semifinal and final matches since her return to tennis in August 2009 as Li pulled off the boilover.

It capped a magnificent week for Li after she eliminated two-time major champion Svetlana Kuznetsova of Russia in the quarterfinals, Serbian Bojana Jovanovski in the semis and Australian Anastasia Rodionova and French qualifier Virginie Razzano in the earlier rounds.

Li became the first Chinese player to break into the world top 10 rankings after reaching the last four at last year's Australian Open.

London honours Cook

AFP, London

Alastair Cook received yet another honour for his starring role in England's Ashes victory away to Australia when he was awarded the Freedom of the City of London on Thursday.

The 26-year-old opening batsman scored a colossal 766 runs in England's 3-1 triumph, a tally that saw Cook named man of the series.

Now the left-hander, who plays for county side Essex, east of London, has followed in the footstepts of England captain Andrew Strauss in receiving the London award. Cook, who will be pre-

sented with the accolade at a ceremony later this year, said Thursday: "I am greatly honoured and privileged to be given the Freedom of London for doing something I love... beating the Aussies."

Cricket

made their final prepara-

on Saturday with the sides

then embarking on a six

REUTERS, Wellington

Akram backs Afridi

Cricket

PTI, Karachi

Former Pakistan skipper Wasim Akram has backed the PCB's decision to retain Shahid Afridi as the national team captain for the one-day series in New Zealand.

Akram's comments came in the wake of the raging debate over whether Afridi should lead the team in the forthcoming World Cup. Some former greats have backed Test captain, Misbahul Haq, to lead the country in the prestigious one-day tournament.

"I feel that changing the captain so close to the World Cup will cause great damage to the national team and its chances in the tournament," Akram told reporters on the sidelines of the Quaid-e-Azam trophy final.

Akram, however, advised Afridi to work hard on his batting and bring more consistency and lead the team from the front.

The board, which is yet to announce the captain for the World Cup, added fuel to the fire when it said that it is also uncertain about appointing Afridi.

The board however named Afridi as captain for the six-match one-day series in New Zealand this week.

Akram felt the selectors had made a mistake by not including senior batsman Muhammad Yousuf for the series.

"Yousuf is a very seasoned campaigner and I think, in the World Cup, when the pressure will be high and all matches will be important you need someone like Yousuf in the middle order to stabilise things. He should be in the side," Akram said. The selectors gave no reasons for

sidelining Yousuf for the series in New Zealand, but kept him in the World Cup preliminary squad of 30 players. The selectors expressed their unhappiness over the fitness of Yousuf which would be tested when he leads the Lahore team in the national one-day championship. Akram also supported having the five-day

Quaid Azam Trophy final under lights.

I think such changes in Test cricket as well will make it more attractive for spectators who now want more action and colour in the sport after the advent of T20 cricket," he said.

"There is nothing wrong in making such experiments that can prove beneficial to not only our domestic cricket but also Test cricket in future," he said.

'Int'l cricket in Pakistan still afar'

PTI, Karachi

Dave Richardson, ICC general manager for cricket operations, feels that the Pakistan Cricket Board's initiative to host the final of the country's premier first class competition under lights will have a positive impact on the sport.

ICC, too, was working on several recommendations to make five-day cricket including Test matches more interesting. "The PCB has taken a bold

Richardson said that the

decision to hold the five-day final under lights and it will help popularise the sport as well," Richardson said.

He said the ICC was considering holding Test matches under lights in a bid to make it more interesting and attractive for the spectators.

Richardson, however, made it clear that it was not possible for an immediate return of international cricket to Pakistan. "I think once there is an improvement in the security conditions and arrangements then teams can be convinced to start looking at playing in Pakistan again," he said.

Richardson is in Karachi on the invitation of the PCB to watch the final of the Quaid eA zam trophy being held for the first time under lights and with an orange coloured ball.

Gazi, DOHS

FROM PAGE 16 Sabbir 3-23, Naeem 3-33).

GAZI TANK: 145-1 in 25.5 overs (Mithun 58, Nasir 68 not out; Hasan 1-37). Result: Gazi Tank won by

nine wickets. BKSP: 133 all out in 32.2

overs (Sarkar 39; Mehrab 3-11, Taskin 3-28). DOHS: 138-0 in 21.4 overs (Javed 53 not out, Nasir 80

not out). Result: DOHS won by 10 wickets.

CCS: 132 all out in 28.1 overs (Shahbaz 56, Suleiman 16; Razzak 3-22).

SURJO TARUN: 119-9 in 31 overs (Junaed 30, Dhiman 26 not out; Bishwanath 3-31). Result: Surjo Tarun won by 13 runs.

India win

FROM PAGE 16 World Cup?

HB: Everything is in our favour. The team has been playing very well, and also the conditions are on our side. All in all there are high expectations. Only one thing; the team should not be burdened by too much expectation, they should continue the way they have been playing and then they will do very well. I hope and expect that they will at least reach the quarterfinals.

Nadal chasing Grand Slam glory little bit. A lot of times I didn't start a tourna-

Tennis

AFP, Melbourne

World number one Rafael Nadal faces a likely Australian Open semifinal with Robin Soderling or Andy Murray as he bids to become the first man in 42 years to hold all four major titles simultaneously.

Soderling and 2010 finalist Murray were placed in the top half of the draw on Friday as Nadal chases his fourth consecutive Grand Slam after stringing together wins at the French Open, Wimbledon and US Open last year. The powerful Spaniard would become

the first man since Australian Rod Laver in 1969 to hold all four Grand Slam titles at once if he can win the Australian Open, which starts on Monday. Nadal said while he was constantly

reminded of that possibility, he did not feel the weight of history. "Everybody asks me this question," Nadal

told reporters on Friday.

"For me the pressure is the same every tournament and the pressure is my pressure, that I want to play well and do the right things.

"We will see what's going on, but (I don't feel) extra pressure."

Nadal's preparation has been hampered by illness and he said it was difficult to gauge how his performances early in the tournament would be affected by the setback.

"It is important to improve every day a

ment playing my best and finished the tournament playing very good," he said.

"Sometimes you start very well, sometimes you don't play that well.

"It's very difficult to say if I'm ready or not ready." Nadal will launch his title bid against

Brazilian Marcos Daniel and could face Croatia's 15th seed Marin Cilic in the fourth Sweden's Soderling, runner-up to Nadal

at last year's French Open, has Italian Potito Starace first up, while Britain's Murray faces Slovakian Karol Beck. Former champion Novak Djokovic was

pitted in the bottom half of the men's draw with four-time champion Roger Federer. The Serbian third seed, who beat Federer

in the semifinals of the 2008 Australian Open and went on to win the title, is in line for a semifinal with second seed Federer based on the seedings. Federer has a first-round match against

Slovakia's Lukas Lacko, while Djokovic lines up against Spaniard Marcel Granollers.

The feature first-round matchup is between two-time Grand Slam winner Lleyton Hewitt and Argentina's 27th seed David Nalbandian, whom the unseeded Australian defeated in the 2002 Wimbledon

Australia's Hewitt and Nalbandian have been locked in a fierce rivalry over the years, with matches including Davis Cup clashes and Grand Slam battles.

Will this be the final 15?

FROM PAGE 16 the shortlist of 23.

There is hardly any chance for uncapped players like the legspinner Sabbir Rahman and pacers Mahbubul Alam, Dollar Mahmud and Syed Rasel. They may not even come under consideration among the eight players who will be dropped from the team. But the others have some brownie points to come into the consideration for selection.

One might think that the recent impressive performance of the team would made the job easier for the selectors, but middleorder and lower-order batting were the real headache for the team even in the 4-0 whitewash of New Zealand. And it would be suicidal to forget that Shakib's men recently won the matches mostly due to the bowlers, particularly the left-arm spinners who played a pivotal role.

A fit Mashrafe Bin Mortaza is always an automatic choice for the team but it is all but confirmed that the Narail Express will not be available before the selection and there is a good chance that Shafiul Islam, Rubel Hossain (who unluckily missed the Zimbabwe series despite his match-winning performance against New Zealand) and Nazmul Hossain will fill the pacers' quota. Lanky Shahadat may fight for the third seamer's spot after his good showing in the ongoing Premier League for Kalabagan Krira Chakra. It is unlikely that the axe will fall on

Junaed and Rokibul while the all-rounder Naeem Islam and Mahmudullah Riyad have a good chance to keep their place in the team despite their poor showing in the recent international series. Bangladesh definitely would love to keep an off-spinning option instead of the three-man left-arm spin attack when they are going to play against India, England, South Africa; all teams with excellent left-handers.

And of course there is no reason not to consider the left-handed Nafees after his impressive series against New Zealand which is now followed by a notable showing in the ongoing Premier League. The in-form southpaw batsman can easily be considered for a middle-order spot as the opening combination -- Tamim Iqbal and Imrul Kayes -are the first names on the team sheet these

As for the conundrum called Ashraful, the selectors would have solely focused on his vast experience (especially in World Cups), if the former captain is to find a place in the fifteen. The selectors will face a lot of questions regardless of Ashraful's status in the team but according to highly-placed sources, he will be picked.

It would be a brave choice given that the current panel has been questioned a few times and almost on every occasion, it had something to do with Ashraful.

As for Jahurul Islam, he definitely deserves a place in the 15-member squad. It's not only that he was unfortunate not to be considered for the New Zealand and Zimbabwe series despite good performance, but also the fact is that he can be considered a back-up wicketkeeper.

But then what will happen to Sohrawardi Shuvo? True he has some performances under his belt but the reality is that he looked very ordinary. His batting could have been an asset apart from his left-arm spin but he could hardly impress anybody.

Many people would also love to see the stylish Kapali in the team but he has hardly done anything to warrant a place. The righthanded batsman's fitness is also a cause for concern as he has also missed quite a few camps ever since he was allowed back in after his ICL stint. Thankfully for Rafiqul, Akram, Masum

and to some extent Shakib and coach Jamie

Siddons, there are only a few places up for grabs. In the next few days, their eyes will only be on those that ultimately provide balance to a good side that has all the potential to bank on in their first home World Cup.

Australia FROM PAGE 16

SCORES IN BRIEF AUSTRALIA: 147 for 7 (Warner 30, Watson 17, Paine

13; Swann 2-19, Yardy 2-19) ENGLAND: 143 for 6 (Bell 39, Davies 29, Morgan 14, Wright 18, Bresnan 15 not out, Woakes 11 not out; Watson 2-17, Johnson 3-29) Result: Australia won by four

21, Finch 53 not out, Smith

Man-of-the-match: Aaron Finch.

India's WC

FROM PAGE 16 event, and the list would be

pruned to the required number as per ICC regulations for the tournament.

The World Cup is to be held in India, Sri Lanka and Bangladesh from February 19-April 2. India are placed in Group B in the preliminary phase along with cohosts Bangladesh, England, South Africa, West Indies, Ireland and Netherlands.

Taking a 2-0 sweep of the Test series against New Zealand was not on the mind of Pakistan captain Misbahul Haq as his side

tions for the second Test at the Basin Reserve on Saturday. The tourists won the first Test in Hamilton by 10 wickets. The second Test begins

match one-day series as they complete their preparations for the World Cup that starts

on February 19.

Pakistan's eye on improvement

Misbah, however, said they had not even discussed a series victory let alone a sweep, instead preferring to concentrate on improving from their performance at

Seddon Park. Misbah also said he expected New Zealand to perform better than they had in Hamilton, where the lifeless pitch offered little to the bowlers, but frustrated New Zealand's batsmen

enough for them to make

mistakes.

Wellington Test starts today

The Basin Reserve wicket was also quite green on Friday and expected to have more bounce and pace than Seddon Park.

New Zealand captain Vettori echoed Misbah's comments about the pitch, but the final make-up of his team, with all rounder James Franklin expected to come into the side, would determine whether he would bat

"Coming to the Basin you think there's a chance early on to take some wickets but I think in the past

the team that has been able to put a decent score on the board has actually had more success with the ball on days two and three," Vettori said.

"It's about trying to balance that up but I think the final weighting of the team will have a huge influence on

whether we bat or bowl. "I think it will be another belter here, in that it will have a bit of pace and there or field first if he won the will be something in it for

everyone. "Guys who are prepared to apply themselves with the ball and the bat will get something out of it."



PHOTO: AFP

Pakistan skipper Misbahul Haq throws the ball during a practice session of the team at the Basin Reserve in Wellington Thursday ahead of their second Test against New Zealand that starts today.