

Mind games on A clash of unpredictables

AFP, New Delhi

India and Pakistan kicked-off the mind games ahead of their World Cup semifinal blockbuster on Sunday while New Zealand attempted to halt a three-pronged Asian assault on the title.

Pakistan, the 1992 champions, insist all the pressure will be on India in Mohali on Wednesday where the hosts' status as tournament favourites will come under scrutiny from a 30,000 crowd made up almost entirely of home support.

"If India were going to win the World Cup, this is their best chance," said Imran Khan, who captained the 1992 Pakistan title-winning team.

"I am not trying to play mind games, but the fact that they are favourites and are playing at home will mean they are under more pressure.

"My advice to the Indian team is to take sleeping pills, otherwise they won't be able to sleep," added Imran in his Hindustan Times column.

Pakistan are keen to ramp up the psychological battle, fully aware of the significance of the first meeting of the two rivals on Indian soil since the 2008 Mumbai terror attacks.

They also know that the number of Pakistan fans inside the PCA stadium will be limited to a trickle of VIPs and Pakistan Cricket Board officials.

Pakistan captain Shahid Afridi has already made it clear that his side will target Indian superstar Sachin Tendulkar who needs one more century to complete 100 international hundreds.

"He will have to wait until after the World Cup. We will make sure no batsman plays a long innings," Afridi told Pakistan's Geo TV.

"India will have more pressure than us. With the crowd cheering every ball, they can get overwhelmed."

However, Pakistan manager Intikhab

Alam, a former Test skipper and coach, has appealed for calm.

"Let it remain as cricket and don't make us feel as if we are standing on a war front," he said.

Sri Lanka will hope to make it an all-subcontinent final when they tackle New Zealand in the first semi-final in Colombo on Tuesday.

Sri Lanka, the 1996 champions, made the last four with a 10-wicket rout of England while the Black Caps defied all expectations by defeating South Africa.

New Zealand will be playing in a sixth semifinal.

"It is important to be confident but we should be realistic. New Zealand will be hungry for a place in the final and so are we," said Sri Lanka skipper Kumar Sangakkara.

Sri Lanka defeated New Zealand by 112 runs in the group stages in a bad-tempered affair where former captain Mahela Jayawardene refused to walk despite claims of a clean catch by Nathan McCullum.

New Zealand's mood was not helped when the decision remained not out even after a TV review.

England captain Andrew Strauss believes his team's five months on the road eventually undermined their World Cup hopes.

England's rollercoaster tournament ended at the hands of Sri Lanka on Saturday with Strauss insisting it was unrealistic to expect success when players are not given a rest.

After their Ashes victory, England played a seven-match one-day international series in Australia.

That was followed by a brief break at home before the World Cup campaign started in the first week of February.

"It's a huge amount to ask players to go to Australia for three months, into the highest intensity atmosphere you can get for an English team, and then go straight into a World Cup without players spending time at home," said Strauss.



EYES ON THE BALL: (L) Pakistan captain Shahid Afridi seems deep in thought while tossing a ball during practice, while (R) India captain MS Dhoni chases a football before practice at the Punjab Cricket Association Stadium in Mohali yesterday. Each will have the other team in the cross-hairs when they clash for a monumental World Cup semifinal here on Wednesday.

PHOTOS: AFP

Gilani accepts Singh's invitation

AFP, Islamabad

In a victory for "cricket diplomacy", Pakistan's Prime Minister Yousuf Raza Gilani has accepted an invitation to visit India to watch the World Cup semifinal between the two arch-rivals.

Wednesday's match in Mohali will be the first between the two sides on Indian soil since the 2008 Mumbai attacks by Pakistan-based militants, which sent tensions soaring.

"It was decided in response to the Indian prime minister's invitation that Prime Minister Yousuf Raza Gilani will visit India to witness the semifinal cricket match," the Pakistan president's spokesman said in a statement Sunday.

Indian Prime Minister Manmohan Singh on Friday invited Pakistan's president and

prime minister to watch the match which will showcase one of the world's most intense sporting rivalries, fuelled by nationalism and a shared history.

Analysts said Singh's invitation was aimed at improving the environment for talks between the two nations.

Relations are still tense following the Mumbai attacks that left 166 people dead and stalled a fragile four-year peace process between the two nuclear-armed South Asian rivals.

"These kinds of visits do not suggest an instant solution to the problems but break the stalemate, help improve the environment which facilitates talks," analyst Hasan Askari told AFP.

Pakistan is holding seven suspects over the attacks on India's financial capital, including the alleged mastermind of the operation, Zakir Rehman Lakhvi, and alleged Lashkar-e-Taiba (LeT) operative Zarar Shah.

AFP, New Delhi

India captain Mahendra Singh Dhoni and his Pakistan counterpart Shahid Afridi will be involved in an engrossing battle of wits in the eagerly-awaited World Cup semifinal in Mohali on Wednesday.

Afridi's team ended Australia's unbeaten 34-match streak at the World Cup with a win in a league match, while Dhoni's side knocked the defending champions out of the tournament in the quarterfinals.

Dhoni and Afridi have so far proved adept at reading the situations and did not hesitate embracing unorthodoxy, like opening the

attack with a spinner in a bid to wrong-foot the opposition.

The Indian captain opened the bowling with off-spinner Ravichandran Ashwin in the quarterfinal against Australia on a slow Ahmedabad track and the move paid off as the spinner removed in-form Shane Watson (25) in the 10th over.

Dhoni needs to intelligently use his limited bowling resources again as he has so far not seriously felt the absence of a fifth specialist bowler, thanks to part-time spinner Yuvraj Singh's 11 wickets in seven matches.

The Indian captain was also proved right when he included Suresh Raina in place of hard-hitting Yusuf Pathan against Australia.

Raina did not let his captain down as he was involved in a match-winning stand of 74 with Yuvraj.

"I prefer to go by instinct (in some situations)," said Dhoni.

India have so far lost just one game, against South Africa when their last nine wickets fell for 29 runs, and Dhoni was quick to remind his batsmen not to play for the gallery but for the team.

Pakistan have so far looked a disciplined and well-knit unit, thanks to Afridi's leadership qualities.

Afridi may not have shown his batting prowess, but has done well as a leg-spinner and fielder. He is the tournament's leading bowler with 21 wickets in seven matches.

He has persisted with wicketkeeper-batsman Kamran Akmal, who had an off-day against New Zealand when he let off Ross Taylor early in the innings. The New Zealander went on to score a century in his team's victory.

It was the only defeat suffered by Pakistan, but Afridi did not regret his decision as Akmal grew in confidence with each game and was involved a century stand in his team's quarterfinal win over the West Indies.

Afridi's moves to promote Akmal as an opener, bring Asad Shafiq in the middle order and playing off-spinner Saeed Ajmal against the West Indies have also paid off.

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Misbah backs Akhtar factor



Pakistan cricketers Shoaib Akhtar (L) and Misbahul Haq play a warm-up football game during practice at the Punjab Cricket Association Stadium Yesterday.

AFP, Mohali

Pakistan batsman Misbahul Haq believes fast bowler Shoaib Akhtar has a key role to play in the World Cup semifinal against India -- even if the pacesetter doesn't take the field.

The 35-year-old Akhtar has said he will retire after the World Cup and has only featured in three matches at the tournament to date.

But he remains capable of working up fearsome speed and may have one last shot at India when Pakistan face their arch-rivals on Wednesday.

"Shoaib Akhtar is a class bowler," said Misbah on Sunday.

"He has performed for Pakistan on a number of occasions including the 1999 World Cup (when the team lost to Australia in the final)."

And Misbah said that, at the very least, he would help

Pakistan's batsmen get ready for the challenge of facing India's seamers.

"Batsmen get to prepare well against pace bowling when they face him at the nets. If he does play in the coming matches, I feel it will give us a psychological advantage."

When it comes to India-Pakistan matches, Misbah is currently associated with the 2007 World Twenty20 final in Johannesburg.

The now 36-year-old Misbah rescued Pakistan from the depths of 77 for six and his 43 almost guided Pakistan to victory in the first World Twenty20 final.

With three balls left, and six runs needed to win, he was last man out when he tried to lap Joginder Sharma over short fine leg and was caught by Shanthakumaran Sreesanth.

Asked if he wanted to put that right, Misbah said: "Every game is a new game and it's not because of that,

that this is a special game. "This is a World Cup semifinal, I really want to play well.

Misbah, one of two former captains in the side along with Younis Khan, praised skipper Shahid Afridi for the way he'd led the side to the semifinals.

Leg-spinner Afridi is the tournament's leading bowler with 21 wickets and Misbah said: "I think the important thing is his aggression and the other thing is that he has led the team by example.

"He is performing really well, just taking wickets at the right time, so that really helps the team when the captain is performing like that. Everybody is standing behind him at the World Cup."

There were concerns that having two ex-captains in a Pakistan team traditionally renowned for its volatility could prove divisive but Misbah insisted: "I think there are always differences in opinion but we always talk to the captain about what he thinks. He's really good at that.

"He listens to the players, especially the senior players and the coaches, we just decide everything with a good co-ordination, and that's why everything is going well and the team is performing well."

Misbah added it was also good to have veteran manager Intikhab Alam, the former Pakistan captain, on board given his experience in helping the team win the 1992 World Cup in Australia and the 2009 World Twenty20 in England.

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