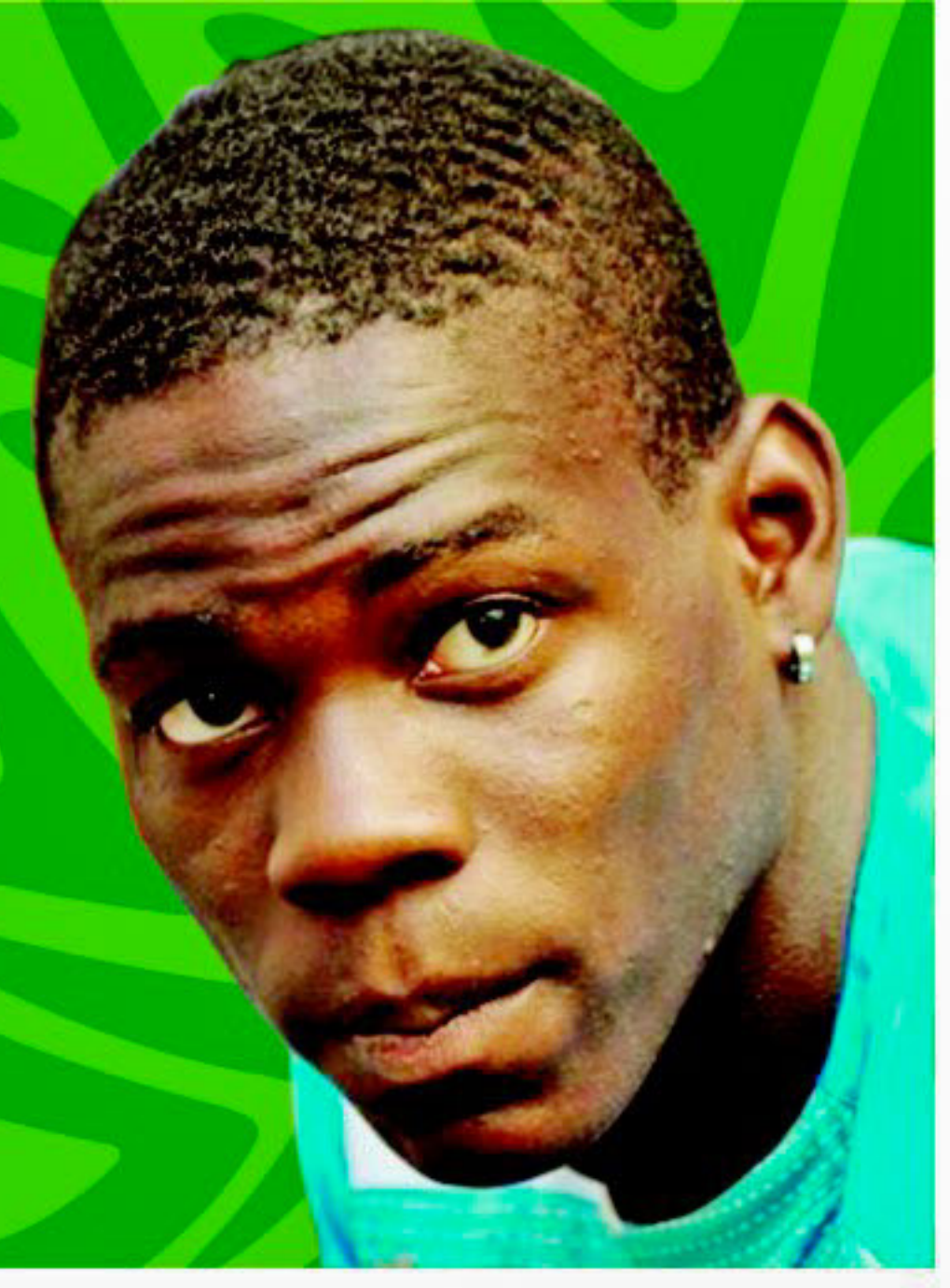


Star SPORT

MARCH 30, 2011, E-MAIL: sports@theda

Balotelli in trouble again

Manchester City are investigating reports that troublesome Italian striker Mario Balotelli threw a dart at youth-team players, according to a report by British daily The Independent on Monday. Balotelli is alleged to have thrown "at least one dart" at members of City's youth squad at the club's Carrington training centre, but his intended targets are reported to have escaped unhurt. "City are yet to establish a full understanding of why Balotelli threw the dart and will give him the chance to offer an explanation before deciding what action to take,"



BONHOMIE TODAY, DAGGERS TOMORROW: Pakistan skipper Shahid Afridi (L) and India captain MS Dhoni are all smiles yesterday. The smiles will doubtless vanish from one face after today's high-octane semifinal. PHOTO: AFP

To get this picture email to pics11@ovi.com @

MOTHER OF ALL BATTLES

Afridi upbeat

AFP, Mohali
Pakistan captain Shahid Afridi said he'd no problems with all the extra responsibility in the World Cup semifinal clash against India on Wednesday. Encounters between the Asian rivals represent cricket's most passionate contests. This one has been especially hyped after India Prime Minister Manmohan Singh used it as a springboard for diplomatic talks by inviting Pakistan counterpart Yousuf Raza Gilani to the match. Political pressure upon the Pakistan team was increased yet further when Interior Minister Rehman Malik warned the side not to 'fix' the match. Afridi, who said he'd spoken to both Malik and Gilani heading into this match, said on Tuesday: "I think I am the cricketer first and then the diplomat. I am an ambassador for Pakistan, so I should know what to say. "I think it's a great sign for both countries and sports, especially cricket always brings these two countries together."

AFP, Mohali
Pakistan captain Shahid Afridi insists that the pressure and expectation will all be on India's shoulders in Wednesday's World Cup semifinal blockbuster. With the prize of a place in Saturday's final at stake, a fever-pitch mood is expected with the 30,000 capacity Punjab Cricket Association (PCA) Stadium sold out days ago for the crunch clash. "We are not the most favourite team for this competition. India is the most favourite and we have played above expectations. We are very confident and we are enjoying our cricket," said Afridi. But India captain Mahendra Singh Dhoni shrugged off the hype surrounding a match which has also taken on huge diplomatic and political significance. "It's an honour to lead the side," said Dhoni. "If you take a pressure job, you will find yourself in a pressure cooker. When you talk about hype and pressure, what does not help you needs to be kept away. "You need to top up on the skills aspect -- vital areas we are focusing on."

INDIA V PAKISTAN	
Matches:	119
India wins:	46
Pakistan wins:	69
Tied/No result:	4
First meeting:	October 1, 1978, Quetta - India won by four runs
Last meeting:	June 19, 2010, Dambulla -

The match will be a clash between Pakistan's well-balanced bowling attack and India's star-studded top order, including opener Sachin Tendulkar who needs just one more century for a hundred international hundreds. "We believe we have the strongest bowling attack in the world," said Pakistan opening batsman Mohammad Hafeez, who took the new ball with his off-spin in the quarter-final win over the West Indies. "That's the key." Pakistan's Umar Gul is arguably the best reverse-swing bowler at this tournament while Saeed Ajmal's off-spin a potent weapon. And then there is the leg-spin of Pakistan captain Afridi who is the tournament's top bowler with 21 wickets at an average of just 10.71 apiece. Meanwhile fast bowler Shoaib Akhtar, who will retire after the World Cup, waits in the wings. Akhtar has played just three games at this tournament but the suspicion remains that India's batsmen can be troubled by high-class fast bowling. "Shoaib is not 100 percent but I think he is trying his level-best and we will decide (on his selection) this evening," Afridi said. India did manage to overcome

Australia's three-pronged pace attack in a five-wicket quarterfinal win in Ahmedabad but that was on a pitch favouring spin. Even then, India collapsed to 187 for five chasing 261 for victory, and it needed a composed 57 not out from the in-form Yuvraj Singh, now back on his home ground, to see the co-hosts to victory. Traditionally, the Mohali pitch has always offered plenty of pace and bounce and that could yet see Pakistan give Akhtar one last shot at India. Pakistan's ability to make early inroads into a top order featuring Tendulkar, Virender Sehwag and Gautam Gambhir could be decisive. India's bowlers, notably left-arm quick Zaheer Khan and off-spinner Ravichandran Ashwin, did a good containing job against Australia. India will look for similar results in a bid to book a place in the April 2 Mumbai final against either Sri Lanka or New Zealand.

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A SINCERE APOLOGY

Dear readers, first and foremost, on behalf of everyone here at The Daily Star Sport, I would like to issue a sincere apology for not being able to provide you with a first-hand view of events at Mohali where India and Pakistan will be clashing in the most high-voltage of World Cup semifinals today. Over the years, India, Pakistan encounters have developed a seminal following in these parts and with such games rarer and rarer these days, events of today take on an even greater magnitude. Hedging for such an event, The Daily Star Sport had planned well in advance to send a reporter to cover the encounter. Given our standing in the regional media scene, we even had a prized accreditation in hand, a lucky feat considering only 10% of all applications for the semifinal was approved. However, as luck would have it, we had to decline our accreditation not due to any mismanagement on our part but because of inexplicable delays in the visa processing by the Indian High Commission which means that our reporter will no longer be able to make it to Mohali in time for the match. As many of you will know, the task of applying for an Indian visa is a long and arduous process. Knowing this, we planned well in advance. Our reporter filled in his online details and received a date on the 21st of March at the High Commission. He kept his date promptly, submitting along with his particulars, a letter from The Daily Star stating the purpose of his visit and a follow-up letter of validation from the International Cricket Council confirming this. Following submission, he was given a receipt that stated that he could collect his visa on the 23rd of March, which would then still leave him

SEE PAGE 17 COL 1

Dhoni unfazed by form

AFP, Mohali
India captain Mahendra Singh Dhoni insists his own form is not a concern heading into the World Cup semifinal against Pakistan on Wednesday. Dhoni, also India's wicketkeeper, has a well-deserved reputation as a hard-hitting middle-order batsman. But his returns with the bat at this World Cup amount to just 125 runs from seven innings at 31.25 with a best of 34. In India's quarterfinal win over Australia the captain did have an opportunity to play a key innings but was out for seven. It fell to left-handers Yuvraj Singh (57 not out) and Suresh Raina (34 not out) to see the home side to a five-wicket success in Ahmedabad. "It's a cricketing aspect," said Dhoni, the face of numerous billboard and television World Cup advertising campaigns. However, he insisted he was not being distracted by outside influences.

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MAX Skin Lightening
MAX Spot Reduction
MAX Sun Protection

TODAY'S MATCH

Match	Time	Venue
India v Pakistan	3:00pm	Mohali

Be The Nokia Match Analyzer

India - Pakistan

This match is all about pressure, and that factor tends to even out things. It means that the highly talented may not be able to perform well while players who aren't that gifted can rise to the occasion and play beyond themselves. A combination of big-hitters and a potent pace attack with a decent spin attack to follow the pacers makes Pakistan a very dangerous side which is very well known to play fearless cricket. It's a great chance for Pakistan to show the world what they are capable of do anything and remove the tag of dark horses and enables them to perform harder. By maintaining a run rate of more than 6.3 runs per over, the performance of Indian team has been outstanding so far. They have also been remarkable in fielding during this tournament.

Iftexhar Hasan

Send your opinion in 100 words on World Cup final match to analysis11@ovi.com. The best analysis will be published.

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